Bestseller Mystery

the angry heart

BY LESLIE EDGLEY

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LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK
Publisher

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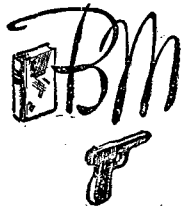

Bestseller Mystery, No. B109

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CHAPTER ONE

As THE parking-lot attendant slouched toward the shabby sedan in the late afternoon, Curt reached under his coat again to touch the cold flat shape of the German Luger in his inner breast pocket. He had to fight against a sudden trembling; the long, steady pull toward annihilation flowed through him like a deadly corrosive. The ugly little automatic had become more than a weapon — it felt like a vicious symbol of vengeance and hatred and death. He watched the attendant shuffle nearer, semi-chinned and acne-ridden, in oil-stained tennis sneakers and faded denim coveralls, yellow tickets in hand. The grimy, characterless face came into focus. He took his hand from his pocket and pressed it hard against the steering wheel.

"How long ya be?"

He hesitated. You couldn't say, "Forever." It would sound like the feeblest of feeble jokes.

"More'n half an hour?"

"I think so. About an hour."

The youth scribbled cryptic hieroglyphics on the back of the ticket. "Two bits, mac."

Curt fumbled through the loose coins in his pocket and found a quarter.

"Put y'emergency on an' lock it up. Keep y'own keys."

"All right."

Stuffing the ticket in his pocket, Curt stepped down to the asphalt and locked the car. Weakness sliced through his knees as he stood in the glossy April sunlight.

"How do I get to the Sorel & Bradford Art Gallery from here?"

The youth stopped whistling.

"Huh?"

"Sorel & Brad ——"

"You got the address, mac?"

"It's on Sunset, near Highland."

"I c'n tell ya what way to go, but person'ly I ain't familiar with the joint. Go back one block, mac. I guess there's plenty of them art places along here, but I never look at 'em. Ain't in my line."

"I see what you mean. Thanks."

Turning away, Curt walked slowly along the pavement. The desert heat had been insidious, enervating. Weakness still drained through the hollow spaces behind his knees. People approached him and overtook him on either side. He was only vaguely aware of them, and he was totally unaware of a grubby-faced little man in a shabby blue serge suit and slouch felt hat who followed unobtrusively behind him. His eyes felt as though they had lost the ability to focus on the outside world, turning inward, like the brooding vision of a sleepwalker.

Kill him . . .

The words seemed to reverberate deafeningly in the vast emptiness of his mind. He had driven more than twenty-two hundred miles in less than five days. Except for his minimal exchanges of words in roadside restaurants, filling stations, and cabins, he had spoken to no one from Chicago to Hollywood. Hour after hour had gone by in silence. It occurred to him once again that he had lived with himself too long — his behavior was no longer quite normal. But it would soon be unimportant. His quarry was within walking distance. He had only to walk up to him and then wait a moment before

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squeezing the trigger — just long enough to think, "This is for Fay — this for Alec" — and then what happened wouldn't matter. Nothing would ever matter again.

Kill him, his mind repeated naggingly — *kill him . . .*

He had thought he was done with killing. The legalized murder of wartime was officially finished. The anonymous human beings he had killed had become dead statistics, not even tiny metal markers on huge wall maps, no longer slogans and headlines. His world had been a slaughterhouse, but he hadn't considered himself a murderer. Murder was an infraction of the civilian moral code. Warfare was conducted in a world of nightmare; there were no moral codes in nightmares. Now the act of killing had become personal and meaningful. It would be his first and final aberration out of uniform.

He reached the curb and counted eighteen steps along the pavement, and then he was there, still oblivious to the passersby, still unaware of the man in the blue serge suit who halted on the corner behind him, at once casual and alert, pausing to light an unnecessary cigarette.

Sorel & Bradford, Art Gallery.

His breath quickened involuntarily as he read the script on the stucco façade. He had reached his goal; his man was inside. Yet his feeling of tense expectancy was tinctured by puzzlement. There was an unexpected air of shabbiness and neglect about the place. The small front windows, used for display purposes, were empty and dusty. In one of them a miniature dais covered with green velvet was turned on its side, revealing its orange-crate origin. He frowned, puzzled and uneasy; then, taking a long breath, he opened the door.

To his surprise the interior was bare in shadow for the most part, lighted only by a single ceiling fixture at the end of the long room. The atmosphere indigenous to art galleries — the hushed quiet, clamorous with unheard voices of framed faces and crowded landscapes, the intangible aura of paint and canvas, the sensation of entering a separate world — was absent. There were no paintings on the walls, and here and there stood empty pedestals which had once supported bronze and marble sculptures. His footsteps sounded hollowly when he crossed the threshold — the carpeting had been taken up from the bare floor.

As he wondered what had happened — it seemed like an impossible mistake he had traveled over two thousand miles to the wrong place — a door opened at the rear of the empty room. Light slanted through the opening, silhouetting a girl standing on the threshold.

For a moment her outline against the light was merely diminutive and youthful, but then, as she came toward him bringing color into the room in her jonquil-yellow suit, his heart abruptly contracted in his chest. Something had gone wrong. It was as though Fay were walking toward him.

The girl came directly and unwaveringly toward him, as if she were going to put her arms about him or walk right through him. His heart began to throb painfully, erratically, like a clenched fist jerking against his ribs. She was Fay to the life — the same walk, the same height, the same slimness, even the same crisp brown hair tousled piquantly on her head. His blood flowed like

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molten wax, dissolving what little vitality he had left after his trip. Then she stopped short — just as Fay had always stopped in front of him. But she wasn't Fay. She was merely the nearest thing to his dead wife he had ever met.

His insides turned slowly inside him as he looked down at her. Then he saw her resemblance to Fay was actually remote. Her height and her walk and her hair had tricked him. There was no other duplication of features. Her eyes were an unblemished hazel, long and oval, almost almond-shaped. Fay's eyes had been soft, dark ovals; her nose had been small and ingenuous, with the shallow bridge of childhood; her mouth had been sensitive and eager. He looked down at a gentle, wistful mouth below a short, straight nose and felt thankful she bore little actual resemblance to his memory of Fay.

She smiled politely. "May I help you?"

He was unable to answer, still looking down at her.

"There's nothing left here," she said. 'Everything's at our new quarters by now."

"New quarters?"

"We've moved to a larger place down the boulevard."

For the first time he noticed her hands. They were small and beautifully shaped and capable-looking. She lifted them from the patch pockets of her bright cardigan jacket to gesture across his silence.

"Did you wish to see Mr. Bradford or Mr. Sorel?"

"Mason," he said. "I understand a man named Mason works here."

She nodded. "That's right."

"I'd like to see him." It was still an effort to speak. Why did she have to remind him of Fay? The sight of her confused him and muddled his purpose — as if Fay would have disapproved of what he was about to do. But that was senseless. Fay was dead, and so was Alec. They had to be avenged. He had come too far to let a momentary illusion betray them. He made himself go on. "I want to talk to him."

"I'm sorry, but he isn't here just now. He's shuttling back and forth between both places today." She smiled again. "You see, we're having a gala opening at the new address this afternoon and evening. It means everything's pretty confused for all of us."

They stood in silence in the long, empty room.

"If you'd like to wait . . ." Her hands moved again, indicating the rear office. "I still have some work to do — but if you'd care to sit down in back ——" Her eyes watched him guilelessly, untouched by curiosity or suspicion. "We still have an extra chair there."

They walked back toward the opened office door, their steps matching, echoing like the measured tapping of slow drumbeats. He avoided looking at her. Too many memories were flooding back because of the tousled head so close to his shoulder — the lazy Sunday strolls in Lincoln Park, the rare evenings of dancing at the Palmer House, walking with linked hands against the brisk March winds along the lake. The images floated and swirled behind his eyes, poignant and heartbreaking as the handful of dance tunes he could no longer bear to hear.

A mahogany desk and two swivel chairs were left in the office. Edged rectangular patterns on the bare walls indicated where pictures had been removed. The chair in front of the desk

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was piled with loose-leaf folders and pen-and-ink and pencil sketches.

The girl transferred the pile from the chair to the cluttered desk. "Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you."

But he was unable to compose himself long enough to relax. He walked restlessly about the room, aware of her watching him for a long moment. Then she turned her attention to the sketches on the desk. She began to check them, one by one, against a scribbled list in front of her. From time to time she took one of the sketches and placed it aside. The others were turned face down in a second pile.

Her movements developed a certain rhythm as he roved the floor. He was impersonally conscious of them, as though two spheres of action were separate and distinct. Then he noticed the rhythm was broken. She had stopped to examine one of the sketches. He moved behind her, approaching her chair at an acute angle, subconsciously inquisitive about the picture which held her attention.

His heart trembled with shock, sharp as the twisting thrust of angina.

Incredibly, inexplicably, it was a pencil sketch he had made of Fay.

The clean curve of line for her rounded chin — the downward sweep of diagonals he had liked to use in his backgrounds. It was his style — or at least the beginning of a style. And it was Fay. He had forgotten about it, but now the moment came back to him in all its original vividness. It was one of several studies he had made of her in their first one-room basement apartment on Huron Street. That portrait he had never painted . . .

His voice sounded choked and unfamiliar to him when he spoke.

"Where did you get that?"

The girl looked up. "Mmmmm?"

Despite himself, his voice shook "Where did you get that sketch?"

"I really don't know. I can't find i on my list, and I don't remember seein it before." She held it up for hin "Don't you think it's beautifully done?

"I suppose I should say yes."

Surprise stirred in her hazel eye "Oh?"

"I haven't seen that sketch in fou years — not since I drew it."

"And now you walk in here!" Sh shook her head and put the portrait o the desk, leaning forward to study i "I can't imagine where we got it!"

"Are you sure of that?"

She looked up. "Well, it isn't on th list, and Mr. Sorel asked me to chec through these things carefully before lock up here. I'm leaving some of the behind, as you can see. How your pi ture found its way into this pile, I dor know. I don't remember ever seeing before."

He turned away, not wanting to loc at her or the sketch. Both were t much for him. They evoked the sen of bereavement he had deliberately pressed — something beyond bereav ment — the indefinable misery of c nied emotion. It was like jungle fev — a shivering of nerves, a crawli clamminess of skin, a deep visce stirring . . . a quick, bewildering su cession of anguish and mourning a bitter regret. He felt himself sha ing under his blue gabardine. Perspi tion began to film his forehead in cla my discomfort.

The girl said, "Are you ill?".

He brushed his hand over his ey "I'm all right. A little tired — tha

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all. I've been driving a long time."

"Won't you sit down and wait, then?"

"Thank you."

But again he failed to sit. An odd notion had taken hold of him. He felt he had to be standing when he met Judd Mason. Somehow it was hard to imagine himself shooting a man while sitting quietly in a chair.

"Are you new in Hollywood?"

He said carefully, "I just arrived."

She looked at her watch. "I don't know how long he'll ——"

"I can wait."

He regretted his curtness, but there was no help for it. The approaching moment was a little different from the scene he had invented and rehearsed again and again during the long, grinding silences of his journey. He had visualized the quiet, luxurious setting of a successful art gallery, a number of people talking in low tones, and Mason standing off to one side in his role as guard. In his imagination he had walked up to him, fixed his face in his memory, and then squeezed the trigger — once, twice — first through the heart, then through the abdomen. After that he meant to drop his automatic on the floor and quietly surrender. But now the scene was meaningless as any of his daydreams about coming home again to Fay.

The waiting threatened to unnerve him. That and meeting the girl, he thought. She shouldn't have reminded him of Fay. He didn't want her present when it happened. It would be too much like Fay watching him. He wondered if he could get her out of the place before he did it — or if he could maneuver Mason outside.

The opening of the front door at the far end of the outer room halted his speculation.

He stopped his pacing and turned toward the momentary sound of traffic and the sharp click of the closing door. His throat ached with a sudden constriction. The man who had entered was his quarry. The description and the photograph the detective agency had obtained for him made the identification unmistakable. He watched Judd Mason walk slowly toward the opened office door and once again fought against trembling.

The man was still lean under his single-breasted gray sharkskin, although his body had begun to thicken with the hardness of the middle forties. He was hatless. His face seemed oddly compact, modeled in harsh planes, as though the bone structure had been put together with physical force, molded between two hands. His nose looked as if it had been broken more than once. His hair was thick and straight, parted on the left side, graying at the temples, yellow-white against his dark skin.

The girl said, "Well, your wait's over."

He didn't answer.

"I don't believe I know your name ——"

"Prentice," he said, watching Mason come through the doorway. "Curt Prentice."

The face he had traced halfway across a continent eyed him with impersonal curiosity. The man had sharp, shiny brown eyes. Their alertness was animal-like, predatory and bold, like a fox or a weasel. His mouth was tight and sardonic under a clipped gray mustache.

The girl rose from the desk.

"Mr. Prentice ——"

Curt barely heard her. A scalding

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wave swept behind his eyes, blurring his vision. This was the man. This was why Fay was dead. This was Alec's murderer. The weighted shape of the Luger inside his coat seemed to draw his hand toward it, as though it were magnetized. The girl was forgotten. The hot curtain behind his eyes made Mason waver uncertainly before him.

The girl said, worriedly, from a great distance, "Mr. Prentice, are you sure you're all right?"

Her words brought him back to reality. He blinked and fought for control and then saw Mason watching the telltale pulse in his throat. His hands were still at his sides, but his blood was beating at a runaway rate.

Kill him, his mind urged — *kill him . . .*

The girl said, "Mr. Prentice ——"

He had to nod reassuringly to her.

She looked at him gravely, slowly forcing a smile. "For a moment I thought ——" Then she turned to Mason, spreading her hands in a little gesture of introduction. "Mr. Prentice — my father . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Her words had the bewildering impact of a physical blow. He felt as if someone had hit him in the face without warning. Her voice came to him again from far away.

"My father," she continued — "Mr Mason."

Looking at them in an agony of indecision, he knew it was impossible for him to act. The Luger had become a useless heavy weight inside his coat. He couldn't kill Mason while his daughter stood between them — it would have been the ultimate in savagery.

He said, awkwardly, with an unforeseen stammer, "I —— I think there's some mistake."

The shiny brown eyes watched his face. "Mistake?" Mason had a harsh, clipped voice. All emotion was filtered from its metallic timbre, like a voice snapping out orders over a loud speaker system. "How you mean?"

Looking at the silver tie clasp which clipped the man's figured blue tie to his light blue shirt, Curt knew he would lie before the words came out. It was like the psychic automatism of the true surrealists — the conscious direction of his mind seemed suspended for the moment. He kept his eyes on the serpent shape of the tie clasp as his words issued from his mouth of their own volition.

"You're not the Mason I'm looking for. I was told Henry Mason worked in one of the art galleries along here.'

"My name's Judd Mason."

"Yes, I can see you're not my man.' He wondered desperately what to do next. His impasse could only be temporary. He couldn't admit defeat and abandon his plan — that would be sheer betrayal of Fay and Alec. Yet he felt impelled to run. He had to fight a compulsion to turn and flee and hide, to pull the bogus protection of bed covers over his head and cower in the terrifying darkness of childhood. "Henry's younger — about my age . . ."

"There's no Henry Mason along here that I know of."

"It doesn't matter." Maybe later, he

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thought. His mind seized at the possibility — that was the thing to do . . . come back later. Later — when the girl was gone . . . "Sorry to have troubled you."

Mason shrugged, "No trouble," and then looked at his daughter. "You all cleaned up, Carol?"

The girl indicated the cluttered desk. "Well, I still have all this stuff ——"

"Bradford wants it all brought over this trip. He said to lock up and bring the keys."

She sighed. "All right. I'll just have to finish straightening it all out over there." Bending over the desk, she suddenly straightened. "Oh, Mr. Prentice ——"

Curt started. "Yes?"

"About your sketch ——"

"Oh, yes," he muttered — "that."

"It's quite a coincidence," she said to her father. "Mr. Prentice walked in here less than ten minutes ago. I started going over these things and came across a sketch he'd done several years ago."

The dark saturnine face was expressionless. "That so?"

"I haven't the faintest idea how it got into the pile. It isn't on my list. For that matter, of course, neither are some of these others." She turned away from her father in a sudden flash of eagerness. "Why don't you come to the new place with us and ask Mr. Sorel or Mr. Bradford about it?"

He started to say, "It doesn't matter," and then checked himself. It did matter. *Kill him, kill him.* He needed the new address. He still had unfinished business to take up with Mason.

"Why don't you?" she asked. "You may find it amusing — our little party, I mean — and I'm sure they can tell you who brought your picture in."

"Sure, come along," said Judd Mason. "The more the merrier. Grab yourself a free drink and something to eat."

The words served to crystallize the decision forming in his mind. "I'll do that."

Carol Mason smiled. "You can help us with these things if you will . . ."

"Of course."

Piling the unsorted sketches in his arms, she pulled open the desk drawers. Two were empty; the single middle drawer contained two large portfolios; in the righthand drawer were several cans of powdered clay. She handed the separate items to her father and then picked up a brown suéde handbag and the sketches remaining on the desk. "I think that's all, isn't it?"

"I guess so," Mason said brusquely. "Let's get out of here."

Curt accompanied them to the street in silence. It seemed the essence of irony. The automatic under his coat still pressed against his ribs, but the beat of his heart no longer urged him toward murder. He had come to kill the man who walked beside him; instead, his sleeve brushed the other's sleeve, as if in friendship. A sick feeling of self-recrimination fluttered through him. One of the agency's reports came to mind.

> M. ordered before investigation board 1937. Drunk he arrested found dead in cell. Dead man's family claimed body showed signs of beating. Broken ribs, internal injuries, crushed genitals. M. claimed prisoner had been in brawl before arrest. Charges dismissed — insufficient evidence.

Their ride to the new gallery was of brief duration. An unpolished brown sedan followed two cars behind them.

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The man at the wheel had his hat brim pulled down to shade his bloodshot eyes; it cast a shadow across his large angular nose and receding chin. The frayed right sleeve of his shabby blue serge coat pulled away from his wrist as he nibbled nervously at painfully short, ragged nails. Three blocks away Mason stopped the car outside a new ferro-concrete structure.

"You can get out here. I'll drive around back with this junk."

Climbing out, still silent, Curt waited on the sidewalk for the girl to join him. Her skirt climbed briefly above slim knees. She slammed the car door. The coupé pulled away into the rush-hour traffic.

"Here it is," she said, smiling. "We're all pretty proud of it."

The gallery had a handsome façade. Its windows were of curved glass. Behind their crystal clearness were several abstract sculptures on white pedestals and two canvasses in plain frames. Both were slickly surrealistic. The first was a typical paranoiac landscape, arresting in its brilliant color, suffused with diamond-clear light. The other was a portrait of a blonde girl, painted without emotion or even real interest in her authentic loveliness, notable only for its silky texture and the fantastic images peopling its dream-world background. A small engraved card beneath them announced a one-man show by Simon Cotton — a new name . . . as unfamiliar to him as other names which had attained some degree of recognition during the war years.

"You don't have to stay — but I think you may like it . . ."

"I think I will," he said, wondering why he bothered with the inanities of politeness. "I hope so."

The door was a solid sheet of thick plate glass. It mirrored his dark intense thinness as he pushed it open into a bubbling murmur of voices. Then it closed behind them, sealed them off from the outside world. It was as though they had entered a synthetic universe, where shadows and extraneous noise alike were forbidden. No sound from the street trespassed within the waxed pine walls. Cool fluorescent light from concealed apertures was refracted from wall to wall with scientific precision.

Carol Mason looked around at the crowd. "I want you to meet Mr. Sorel or Mr. Bradford . . ."

The invited guests moved in a languid ballet pattern, cocktail glasses in hand, sampling canapés and stuffed olives and celery hearts, pausing before the paintings on the walls, gossiping in little groups on chairs and couches upholstered in pale yellow leather. The men were in casual jackets and flannel slacks, with silk scarfs knotted loosely in lieu of ties. The women wore tailored suits and sables. Here and there was an inevitable soul in vivid slacks and lustrous furs. The white jackets of several waiters slipped unobtrusively through the throng.

The girl murmured, "I know they're here . . ." Then her face brightened. "Yes, here's Lloyd Bradford."

A tall man in loose brown tweeds came toward them. He appeared to be in his thirties, big-featured, with close-cropped sandy hair and ears prominent as opened wing flaps. There was a deep indentation in his square chin; it would have been a dimple in a face cast on less generous lines. He moved with the lanky awkwardness of a man given to sport and exercise out of a sense of size rather than aptitude.

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"Hullo, Carol!" His voice was a pleasant, reedy baritone. "Everything settled at the old place?"

"Mmm-hmmmm." She gave him the keys her father had told her to bring with her. "I want you to meet Curt Prentice."

Bradford had a quick, firm handshake. "How do you do?"

"Mr. Prentice dropped by just before we left. He was looking for a Mr. Mason. Not my father, though — someone else. We were both very much surprised when one of those sketches I was going through turned out to be something he'd drawn."

Bradford's smile crinkled the corners of his light blue eyes. "Quite a coincidence! Did you bring it with you?"

"My father's bringing it in the back way with the other things."

"Well, I'll have to look at it . . ."

"Mr. Prentice was naturally interested in knowing where we'd got it."

"Through our regular channels, I imagine. Vic's bound to know about it. He knows every single item we've ever bought and sold."

"The reason I'm interested," Curt said, "I haven't seen that sketch in four years, and I don't remember ever offering it for sale."

The big, rangy man moved awkwardly under his tweeds. "Well, in that event ——"

"Here's Mr. Sorel," Carol Mason interrupted quickly. "I think he's coming this way ——"

A slender, dapper man detached himself from a little group standing before a painting on the opposite wall. He moved toward them, shorter than either Bradford or Curt, in a suit of dark elegance. His hair was thin and graying, combed back in a flat pompadour from an intelligent forehead. He had a thin dark mustache which blurred the grave line of his mouth. His olive-brown eyes were underlined by urbane shadows.

"Have you finished at the old place, Carol?"

He had a preciseness of speech which was almost an accent, as though each phrase were carefully translated from another language before he spoke.

"Yes, everything's locked up now."

"Splendid!" His hands moved expressively as he gave her a leather key case. "Thank you again for the use of your car . . ."

"I don't really need it back," she said. "I can drive home with my father."

"No, no. I've no need for it now."

"All right, then." She smiled. "I've brought another guest with me."

"Indeed?"

"Mr. Sorel — Mr. Prentice . . ."

"Delighted!" His hand was softer than Bradford's, but his grip was firm. "Surely you're drinking, Mr. Prentice?"

"We've just arrived."

"Then we must remedy that!" He halted a waiter bearing a tray of cocktails.

"Mr. Prentice is really one of our discoveries," Carol said. "We have one of his pencil sketches."

Sorel frowned. "I don't remember . . ."

She told him the circumstances, but he still failed to recall the drawing.

"Have you done much work, Mr. Prentice?"

"Not for several years. I was in the army four years. I did a few things before I went into uniform."

"Sell any of them?" asked Bradford.

"I didn't do them to sell them. I was busy with commercial stuff for a couple of advertising agencies in Chi-

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cago. The other things were purely for myself."

"What are your plans now?"

"I don't know," Curt muttered, abruptly aware of being too loquacious. "I haven't decided."

Across the crowded room the ambiguous murmur of voices was dominated momentarily by a high, arrogant voice, unpleasant as a peacock cry.

"Cotton's getting out of hand again," Bradford said quietly. "Maybe you'd better talk to him, Vic."

"Perhaps I'd better," agreed Sorel, putting down his drink. "You'll excuse me?"

The others murmured their assent.

"By the way, Mr. Prentice ——" The dapper picture dealer looked back for an instant. "If I may see your sketch later ——"

Curt nodded in agreement as Sorel turned toward the shrill, egocentric voice rising again at the end of the room.

"That's Simon Cotton," explained Carol Mason. "Our guest of honor."

"Too bad Vic's the only one who can handle him," said Bradford. "I wish I knew how to cope with the stinker." He looked restlessly about the room. "I thought I saw Lenore . . ."

She touched his sleeve. "Over there . . ."

"Oh, yes!" He edged away, ducking his head in an awkward grin. "Excuse me . . ."

Curt watched him thread his way through the guests toward a thin brunette with a cream-smooth oval face. Her long straight black hair was parted in the middle and combed back behind her small, pointed ears. On another woman the coiffure would have seemed slatternly, but it served only to accentuate her brooding sleekness. Even from a distance she projected a sulking, feline quality. The thin, red line of her mouth in her white face had the careless grace of a brush stroke by Matisse. He wondered about her eyes — if their color had determined her choice of her Nile green tea gown . . .

"Mr. Sorel's sister, Lenore," said the girl beside him. "Don't you think she's striking?"

He nodded. "Are they French?"

She laughed. "Everyone asks that question the first time. They're not, strangely enough — or at least only halfway. They were born in Philadelphia, but their mother was French. The family was fairly wealthy and moved to France just before the first war. Their parents died in the twenties, but Lenore and Victor stayed on. Mr. Sorel became an art dealer in Paris. Then the second war came. He was wounded in an air raid in 1941, and when his health failed to improve, they were able to get American visas and passports and came back home via Portugal and South America. It didn't seem much like home at first — both of them had distinct accents. Mr. Sorel's completely recovered his health, though, and he's been very successful in his partnership with Mr. Bradford." She laughed again. "If I sound glib, it's because I've told all this to so many people before . . ."

He took another cocktail from the tray beside them, thinking of those he had seen who had been much less fortunate, the ones without a second country to serve as a refuge in time of terror. He took a melted cheese canapé from the tray and thought again about the man he had come to kill and the agency reports which had been so numerous and so incomplete. *"M. shot*

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and killed Mexican youth, 15, in 1939. Stopped boy for questioning; claimed self-defense." He looked across the room at Victor Sorel.

The dealer was talking to a little circle of guests, addressing his remarks primarily to a huge individual whose girth was stressed rather than minimized by a lapelless burgundy-red jacket decorated with large gilt buttons.

"Simon Cotton?"

Carol Mason nodded. "He's pretty immense . . ."

The man was overwhelming in size, but he had none of the convoluted bagginess of most fat men. His obesity was the swollen tightness of an inflated balloon, as though air pressure ironed out all wrinkles from the smooth skin covering his vast frame. Short black hair dipped in a peak down his domed forehead. Even while silent, he exuded a domineering arrogance.

"His ego's bigger than his waistline," she murmured. "You don't have to meet him, though. We can pick up your sketch, if you like. My father should be back in the office by now."

He took another canapé as she led him through the crowd. Voices murmured ceaselessly around him. A clashing potpourri of perfumes scented the air in a kind of olfactory pandemonium. He felt thick-tongued and unsteady on his feet. The alcohol was already beginning to tell on him.

There had been no need for drinking while he was with Fay. When he had come home and learned the truth about her death, he had been tempted to try to obliterate it from his consciousness with the help of alcohol. But he had repressed the impulse, even when meeting with Mel Gitzer, one of the agency men assigned to his case, talking to Gitzer in quiet bars off State Street, paying him to arrange for a new firing-pin for his Luger. Only one thing had mattered at that time — the need for revenge.

Dull anger burrowed through him at the thought of it. He was being a fool. He had let himself be put off from revenge by sentimentality. Now he was a little drunk and dazed with fatigue. He had to wait until he was sober and in full control before he could act.

At the end of the room Carol Mason opened a door which was set flush with the wall. It seemed no more than a decorative panel until she pushed it open. The hushed clatter of a typewriter came to them. The door swung noiselessly back into the wall, and the sounds of the party became faint and remote. There were two offices. The first was in the state of disorder characteristic of moving day. A girl was typing in the second office. She halted her work as they entered, peering at them through horn-rimmed glasses.

"Oh, hello, Carol."

"Hello, Janet." There seemed to be an indefinable coolness between them. "Did my father come in yet?"

"I haven't seen him since he went to pick you up."

In the pause that followed Curt felt, for the first time, there would be no introduction. There was an odd sense of constraint between the two girls. But Carol Mason turned suddenly and indicated his presence.

"Miss Craig, Mr. Prentice . . ."

Janet Craig nodded at him from her typewriter. "How do you do?"

She was an oddly colorless girl, if you considered her in relation to her surroundings. She wore her lusterless brown hair in a page boy bob, cut

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straight across the forehead, above thick unplucked brows and timid gray eyes. Her pointed nose and pointed chin would have given her a heart-shaped face if she had taken advantage of lipstick and powder; instead, without makeup, in a subdued gray suit and white blouse, she merely had a Minnie Mouse face.

Carol Mason said, "Do you have to work back here today, Janet?"

"I do if I want to get away on my vacation tomorrow." The girl fidgeted with the typewriter carriage. Her fingers were ink-stained and in need of a manicure. "I can't go until I finish my work."

"I've told you I'll take care of it for you."

"No, thanks. I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself."

Carol Mason shrugged. "Whatever you want to do . . ." She turned to Curt. "Janet's spending her vacation at Mr. Bradford's beach house just outside Santa Barbara. Nobody's there now, so she'll be all alone. She'll have nothing to do but loaf."

"Without a single newspaper, radio or movie," said the girl at the typewriter. "That's why I'm going. I'm cutting myself off from the world for two whole weeks."

A door opened in the storeroom behind the office. Sounds of a truck starting up and a dog barking came to them before it closed. Judd Mason entered the office, carrying the sketches and portfolios from the car. Curt set his teeth against a renewed, involuntary trembling as he watched the man set them down on an empty desk in the corner.

"Still got that clay and junk," Mason said. "Here's your picture."

His glossy fox eyes surveyed Curt with inscrutable directness as he handed the bristol board to him. *"M.'s record on Chicago force marked by brutality, graft; arrested over a thousand women . . ."* Then he turned and went out.

Curt made no answer. The drawing was shaking in his hand. He closed his eyes against a sudden upsurge of self-accusation. Mason was still alive. He had failed once again to complete his mission.

The party was still in full swing when they re-entered the outer room. They caught sight of Victor Sorel as the panelled door closed behind them. He had left his guest of honor to talk to a slender blonde girl in a fitted gold silk cocktail dress.

An expensive blonde, Curt thought automatically — a platinum-and-emeralds blonde. Somehow, disturbingly, she seemed familiar. Then he recognized her — she was the original of the Cotton portrait on display in the window. It was easy now to understand the artist's slick treatment of his subject. Her fine, long hair fell loosely over her shoulders in a shining, gilt web. She had a bright, cool, inviting mouth. She was taller than Carol Mason, about the same height as Sorel.

"Did you find it?" Sorel called out to them.

They went over to him and then waited while he looked at the sketch with appraising eyes. Curt was conscious of the blonde girl watching him. The party bubbled around them in colorful gusts of talk and laughter.

Carol Mason said, "Do you remember where we got it, Mr. Sorel?"

The dapper, graying man brushed a knuckle across his mustache, frowning puzzledly. "I've never seen this

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anywhere before . . ." He continued to study it. "Very interesting, however — quite intriguing. Don't you think so, Nedda?"

The blonde girl moved closer, lifting arched brows in appreciation. "I like it."

She had a lazy manner of speaking. It was a calculated languor that went with too much time and too much money.

Sorel said, "This is the artist, incidentally," and introduced them. "Mr. Prentice, Miss Kendall."

Nedda Kendall looked at him with eyes blue as matched turquoise. "How do you do, Mr. Prentice?"

"How do you do?"

"You have a nice style," she said. One of your favorite models?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Why do you ask *that?* It's like picking up a stranger's love letter."

To his chagrin he found himself reddening. She had touched his vulnerable spot — the only one who had instantly detected the love which had motivated his pencil. But in the same instant he knew there was more to it than that. His outer dull flush suddenly burned deep inside him — she was the first woman to interest him sexually since he had come home. Carol Mason had reminded him of Fay, but his emotion had been a commingling of grief and nostalgia. His compulsive pull toward Nedda Kendall was an instinctive, uncontrollable reaction. The cool challenge in her eyes — the curve of breast and thigh . . . he deliberately closed his mind to it. Too many complications had already arisen. He looked at her bland half-smile and reddened still further.

Victor Sorel shook his head, puzzled. "Where could we have picked it up? Does Lloyd know, Carol?"

"He hasn't seen it yet."

A rich, full-throated voice said, "May I see it?" and they turned to look at the newcomer who had just joined them.

He was strikingly handsome at first glance, almost Byronic, with a bold chin and proud nose and a full red mouth. But his thick dark hair was too long and too wavy, worn too long over his ears and at the back of his neck. He had knowing dark eyes under dark brows that seemed shaped with the aid of tweezers and hand mirror. Like Nedda Kendall, he was expensive. But he was expensive and sleek in an indefinably epicene way. His voice was rich but pitched a note too high. He was less Byron than a dark, thirtyish Brünnehilde in an immaculate tan covert-cloth jacket and a beige silk shirt open at the throat.

Nedda Kendall said lazily, "Hello, Claude, darling. When did you arrive?"

"Barely an atomic instant ago, my sweet."

Victor Sorel introduced him to Curt. "— Claude Guthrie."

They shook hands. Guthrie wore an ornate signet ring on his right hand. His grip was firm, almost lingering.

"Very nice," he said, looking at the pencil portrait. "Whose work?"

"You've just met the artist," Carol Mason told him.

"Well, congratulations . . ." He turned to Sorel. "How much are you asking for it?"

"Mmmm?"

"I'd like to buy it. What's your price?"

The slight, soft-spoken dealer

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shrugged. "I'm not sure it's mine to sell."

"Mr. Prentice, then?"

"I don't know, either. I haven't seen it for four years."

Curt looked at the two partners, from Bradford to Sorel.

"It's yours, of course," said the latter. "Do whatever you like with it."

"No," he said shortly, almost harshly. "It's not for sale."

A sudden interruption saved him from further complications. Simon Cotton's voice soared with parakeet indignation behind them. They turned. Lenore Sorel stood beside the tall fat man, eying him with open amusement, seeming almost bonelessly slender beside his immense girth. She replied to his angry outburst in a low tone. Cotton flushed and then stepped forward, as if to strike her.

"You vixen!" he cried wrathfully. "Vent your spite where it belongs, you hooded adder!"

Again Lenore Sorel murmured a reply in undistinguishable tones.

The fat man raised a quivering fist. "You drab! No one can say that about Simon Cotton!"

"Simon's artistic temperament can be like arrested development when he's in the mood," said Nedda Kendall. "It's time he realized how much Lenore delights in teasing him." The cool, red mouth tightened momentarily. "Not that he's alone in that respect . . ."

Curt strained to keep his mind attentive — the alcohol was beginning to take unmistakable effect. It made a deadly combination with his fatigue and lack of food. The floor swayed like a rocking hammock under his feet.

"Mr. Prentice ——"

He steadied himself, looking at Carol Mason with somber eyes.

"I'm all right. Just a little tired."

He was conscious of a sudden change inside him as he spoke. He felt as though someone were watching him. It was the familiar sensation of tingling nerves between his shoulder blades — the effect of eyes boring into his back . . . someone staring at him from behind. He had to resist a desire to turn and look toward the outer door. Then the moment was past. He relaxed, telling himself a passerby had stopped to peer through the glass at the chatting guests.

"I suppose I'd better start looking for a hotel room," he said.

Nedda Kendall murmured, "Optimist," and moved away with indolent grace.

Carol Mason was watching him. "You'll never get a room anywhere at this hour, you know."

"I think I can manage."

"You don't know Hollywood," she said. "You'd better come home with my father and me."

"No, I couldn't. I couldn't impose on you."

The irony of it — to spend the night under the roof of the man he had come to kill — echoed through him like bleak, mirthless laughter.

"It's no imposition. You can sleep on the divan in the living room."

He was thankful his voice was still free of slurring thickness.

"I couldn't ask you to ——"

"Yes, you can," she said. "You're so tired now you can barely see straight. We'll all go home together. We live in Glendale."

He groped weakly for a last excuse. "My car's still in the parking lot."

"Is it locked?"

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"Yes."

"Leave it there all night, then. You can pick it up in the morning."

He felt strangely frustrated, helpless as a playwright finding his play taken over by performers casting themselves in roles he had failed to create.

"You really ought to sit down," she said. "I'll tell my father you'll be coming home with me."

She was gone before he could protest, moving briskly and lightly as a diminutive ballerina through the gossiping crowd. He looked around the thronged room for Judd Mason, but the man was nowhere in sight. He shook his head. It was absurd to think of accepting her invitation.

The sensible thing to do, he thought — the only thing to do . . .

A sudden outburst at the door shattered his introspection.

"To hell and damnation with the pack of you!" cried Simon Cotton in a shrill, thin voice.

The towering fat man glared at the assemblage in the abrupt silence provoked by his unexpected denunciation. Victor Sorel put a placating hand on his wine-red sleeve. Cotton brushed aside the conciliatory gesture with a huge hand and swung about with elephantine petulance and pulled open the heavy glass door.

Simon Cotton uttered a loud, succinct, unmistakable obscenity, and then the glass door swung closed behind him as he pushed arrogantly past a narrow-shouldered man in blue serge who had paused to light a cigarette on the sidewalk. The stranger moved quickly on, his face obscured by his cupped hands.

Several people laughed in the embarrassed pause succeeding the staged exit — an amused masculine chuckle here and there . . . a few scattered giggles from those women who had refused the fewest cocktails.

Curt listened to the hum of their voices from behind closed eyes. The alcohol mingled treacherously with his blood stream. The floor was gently lurching under him.

But when he opened his eyes, ready to move toward the door, he found Victor Sorel standing beside him.

"Are you all right, Prentice?"

"Yes."

"What are your plans now you're out here?"

The question came as a surprise. "I hadn't actually thought about ——"

Sorel brushed his mustache with a light fingertip. "Your sketch interested me. If you come in tomorrow morning and talk to me . . ."

Again Curt listened to the ironic laughter bubble inside him.

"It's possible I might be able to help you," said the older man. "What do you say to coming around at ten-fifteen in the morning?"

"I'll be here," Curt said, knowing he lied. "Thanks."

He watched Sorel walk slowly toward the rear office, stopped from time to time by guests eager to express their myriad reactions to Simon Cotton's parting shot.

Watching him, he could still hear the quiet, urbane voice offering to help him. It was the last mordant touch he needed to complete his comedy of unexpected errors — to be offered help in obtaining work he would never do. To start working again would be to start a new life. His life was almost run out. He had one more hurdle to knock down — as he had done so often in his

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track days — and then he would be finished.

He turned to head toward the door and then took a backward step.

"I guess you're spending the night with us," said Judd Mason, facing him. "Carol figures she can leave in the next half hour."

CHAPTER THREE

It was after nine before he left Hollywood, and it was Carol Mason and not her father who drove him to Glendale.

To his surprise Janet Craig accompanied them, sitting beside him in unobtrusive silence, talking neither to him nor to the girl behind the wheel. The car was small and drab, undistinguishable from the dusty black coupé Judd Mason had driven. As they climbed inside, Carol Mason said, "Janet boards with us," and then, a few minutes later, "My father'll be along later." After that she remained silent for several long blocks.

An unwashed brown sedan began to follow them a block away from the gallery.

Curt said, hoping he could trust his voice, "Will your father be late?"

"I don't know. He's staying behind to lock up after everybody's gone. Some of them may take forever to go home."

"What is he? A sort of guard for the place?"

"Guard and watchman. A general handyman, you might say."

Nothing else was said until they reached the house in Glendale.

It was a small stucco bungalow on the corner lot of a street flanked on both sides by small stucco bungalows. Their lights picked out a neat green lawn and rose trees blooming on either side of a narrow concrete walk leading to the house from the sidewalk.

Carol Mason handed him the pencil sketch he had left on the shelf behind the car seat. He walked around the house with the girls and up three steps behind them and stood in awkward silence on the narrow entrance-porch while Carol opened the door. A brown sedan went past them on the street, then swung around and parked.

He was mildly surprised when she switched on the light. Snobbishness, he thought. He had automatically expected to find the usual shoddy gimcracks and clashing colors in the living-room; instead, its furnishings were neat, colorful, functional. A Degas reproduction was hung behind a custom-built divan. Two matched O'Keeffe prints decorated the adjoining wall. For a happy change, the radio cabinet was neither a lacquered cheese box nor a bogus period piece. He wondered how accurately the room mirrored Judd Mason and then decided it failed to reflect him in any possible way. It was a feminine room, obviously a setting for Carol Mason — a setting influenced as much by her working background as by her own innate sense of taste and style.

"What would you like to eat?" she asked.

"Just coffee, thanks. Black."

"Plus a little ballast," she said, smiling. "Just make yourself comfortable while Janet and I make ourselves domestic in the kitchen."

Alone, he moved restlessly about the

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room. He had to decide his next move. His desire for vengeance was as strong as ever, still sharp and aching inside him, but he felt thwarted by the situation into which he had blundered. He couldn't kill a man whose daughter had invited him into their home — he couldn't commit the act in her presence. He had to delay it — not because he wanted to do it in secret . . . it was important that he be acknowledged as an executioner — but because he had to do it away from her. She was too much like Fay.

Miserably, angrily, damning the detective agency in Chicago for failing to mention the girl, he stopped his tour of the room to look at a photograph on the radio cabinet. It was the only photo in the room — a studio portrait in a small leather easel . . . a full-face study of a gray-haired woman who had once been pretty. The retoucher's brush had wiped much of the character from her face, but a deerlike timidity and courage still remained in her eyes and the set of her chin.

"My mother," Carol Mason said behind him.

He turned. "She looks a little like you."

"Some people think so. She died two years ago."

Momentarily her face was grave and unguarded, almost childlike in its defenselessness. The bleakness of bereavement shadowed her eyes. Then she smiled, wanly, deliberately.

"I wanted to know if you'd like another drink before we eat."

"No, thanks. I've had enough for one day."

She had a plywood serving tray in her hands. He cleared magazines from a low square coffee table before the divan and cleared a space for the tray. It bore sandwiches, salad bowls, relish dishes, sugar and cream, three empty cups and saucers.

"I hope it's enough," she said.

"More than enough."

Janet Craig appeared with the coffee. She set the percolator on a magazine on a corner of the table and then sat quietly across from them. Carol Mason passed the sandwiches. They sat and ate in silence.

The food helped him. It was obvious his dizziness had been a combination of hunger and fatigue — the drinks had intensified it. He had two cups of coffee. His head cleared, though his body was still heavy with weariness.

"I hope you'll find the Mason you're looking for," said the brown-haired girl.

"It isn't too important. I'll make a few more inquiries tomorrow."

"Do you intend to stay in Hollywood?"

"I don't know. My plans are pretty indefinite."

All at once he found it impossible to maintain the simple conversation. He felt steeped in weariness, as though he had been working at full pitch for days. His mind lagged behind the spoken words, urging him towards sleep.

Then Janet Craig said, "Your father's here," and his lethargy dropped from him.

Curt fought a sudden involuntary trembling as the man appeared in the doorway. It was the third time the reaction had seized him, but it was neither fear nor anger. It was an inexpressible fusion of all the hatred and loneliness and bereavement he had kept stifled inside him. His body shook with

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their combined intensity, and his hand felt irresistibly drawn to the revolver under his coat.

But Carol Mason moved beside him, switching off the radio. "I didn't think you'd be home so soon . . ."

"Everybody left soon after you did. Cotton sort of put a damper on things." The metallic voice rasped across the nerves. "Anything to eat?"

"Well, we've some salad left . . ."

"Rabbit food," said Mason. "I'll go get myself something."

There was an awkward silence after he had gone back to the kitchen. They heard him open the refrigerator door and then slam it. He knocked over a can in the pantry.

Janet Craig stood up. "I'll see if I can help him."

A sense of constraint seemed to filter into the room the instant they were alone. He thought of the first time he had called on Fay, when she had shared the South Parkway apartment with Alec. Each time her brother had left them alone the same awkwardness had trembled between them. There had been a compulsion to move toward her, to take her in his arms and kiss her. But not with this girl. The tension between them was something infinitely more than shyness. The thought of death lay between them like an invisible shadow.

She said, "I hope Mr. Sorel gets his car back . . ."

"I noticed he'd borrowed yours."

"His was stolen day before yesterday. The police haven't been able to trace it, and you can't get around out here without a car."

"What does his sister think about it?"

She smiled. "I really don't know. Anyway, she's not as caustic as you might think after today's outburst. That was mostly Simon Cotton's fault."

He stifled a yawn. "He looks like something he created for one of his backgrounds."

"You're tired," she said quickly. "Whenever you think you'd like to turn in ——"

"I still think I ought to look around for a hotel room."

"Don't be silly. You'll never find accommodations at this hour."

"But there's no room ——"

"Janet and I have our own bedrooms, and my father sleeps out on the sleeping porch. I think the divan'll be long enough for you."

There was nothing he could say. Further argument was useless. It would only involve him in embarrassing, stammering explanations.

"All right," he said. "Thanks."

In a little while Janet Craig came back from the kitchen.

"Your father's going to bed. I think I'll pack my bags for the morning."

Carol rose. "If you need any help ——"

"I can manage," said the older girl. "Good night."

They murmured a common reply and then found themselves alone again, silent, chary, constrained. Light shone in a thin blade under Janet Craig's closed door, and then the light went off in the kitchen. They heard a door open and close as Judd Mason went out to the sleeping porch. The silence became oppressive, surrounding them, isolating them. He knew the reasons for his own uneasiness, but he wondered about her lack of composure. Her hands moved restlessly against her skirt.

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"You're really tired," she said at last. "I'll let you get some sleep now." She went to a closet in the brief hallway leading to the bedrooms and the kitchen and then returned with folded blankets and a pair of men's pajamas. "They're my father's. I hope they'll fit you."

"Thank you," he said, taking them from her. "Good night."

His words were more terse than he had intended to make them.

"Yes," she said quietly. "Good night."

Absurdly, ironically, he felt more ill-at-ease than ever, the moment he was alone. Sleep was out of the question. He had let circumstances maneuver him into an impossible situation, with Mason's pajamas neatly folded on the cushion beside him and Mason sleeping less than fifty feet away. He had traveled more than two thousand miles to kill a man and then had meekly become his guest.

It was time he acted. He had to act. He tried to force the decision into his brain with the pressure of his fists. His automatic still pressed his chest — a worthless piece of metal until he used it. All he had to do was walk quietly out to the sleeping porch, switch on the light and then fire his shots at close range. It was as simple as that — the sensible thing to do . . . an uncomplicated act of execution.

The sensible thing to do. . .

At last, when his cigarette was finished, he climbed slowly to his feet. *"According to officers who used to work with him, M. always prided self on high number of arrests and harsh treatment of prisoners . . ."* His body ached with a reluctance to move, but he had reached his decision. All his qualms were ruthlessly repressed. No matter if she were Mason's daughter — no matter if she reminded him of Fay . . . it had to be done.

"M.'s association with vice syndicate definitely proved . . ."

Going to the front door, he opened it without a sound and then closed it softly behind him. The night air was cold and penetrating. The street was deserted; the lights had gone out in the neighboring houses. The brown sedan was still parked across the street. He put his hand in his coat to touch the Luger and then went down the steps and along the driveway to approach the sleeping porch from the rear. For a moment faint protest against his action stirred in his stomach. But he forced himself to move forward, slowly, grimly, with a growing chill contraction in the muscles of his scalp.

All at once there was an equivocal rustling sound behind him. He began to turn instinctively, but he moved too late. A paralyzing blow struck him at the base of the skull. His knees buckled under him, and he sank into unconsciousness, like a pebble tossed into a tarry pool.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE summer he was thirteen he had jumped into icy water to save a stray dog struggling in the lake off the Jackson Park breakwater and had barely escaped drowning for his pains. Now, as his body floated heavily and lump-

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ishly into consciousness, the same steady roaring filled his ears. He opened his eyes to find Carol Mason bending over him.

Her face, out of focus at such close angle, was little more than a disembodied blur in the darkness.

"What's wrong?" she demanded. "What happened?"

"Carol?" Janet Craig called tremulously from the house. "What's wrong out there?"

"Turn on the driveway lights, Janet!"

A spotlight over the garage suddenly lighted up the driveway in response to her command. When he rose to his feet, the ground threatened to slide away from him at a treacherous angle. He reached instinctively for support and then found Carol Mason holding him. There was more strength than he had suspected in her slight young body. She wore a polka-dotted robe over her pajamas. Her eyes were bright and apprehensive in the glare of the spotlight.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure."

"But what were you doing out here?"

"I thought I heard something outside and came out to investigate . . ." His lame explanation sounded like a palpable lie, but he had to finish it. "Then something hit me over the head . . ." He made a vague gesture, no longer needing her support. "I'm all right now."

"But who could've done it? Why would anyone want to attack you?"

"I don't know."

Footsteps tapped on the driveway behind them. They turned. Janet Craig came toward them, shapeless in a serviceable chocolate-brown chenille robe.

"I woke your father up, Carol. I thought he ought to know about it."

"Oh, yes. Thank you."

"What happened? What's it all about?"

"We're not sure," the brown-haired girl answered. "A prowler, I imagine . . ." She turned to Curt. "We'd better get back in the house."

"All right."

They had reached the front steps when Judd Mason came out on the entrance porch, still pulling a plaid robe over his pajamas. His hair was broken over his forehead in the dishevelment of a man wakened from sleep.

"What's up out here?"

His daughter told him.

"You lose anything, Prentice? Anything taken from you?"

Curt restrained an impulse to pat his coat for his automatic. It would have been a needless gesture — the Luger was gone. He reached inside his jacket with his left hand for his wallet. It, too, was missing.

"Just my wallet."

"You have much in it?"

"My identification papers and about thirty dollars."

A sudden wave of dizziness rocked him. He reached out for the sloping iron railing flanking the steps.

"Take him inside," Mason ordered. "I'll look around first."

Curt accompanied the two girls into the house without protest. He let himself down on the divan and then winced slightly as Carol Mason probed the back of his head with gentle fingers. The area was swollen and tender, but the blow had failed to draw blood.

"Take your shoes off," she said. "Then you can settle back and really relax."

His head threatened to burst when he bent over to untie his shoes. He set

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his teeth against the sudden pain and slipped off his shoes and then settled back on the divan. His blood throbbed uneasily in his temples. Both girls watched him in silence. With a solicitude close to suspicion, he thought — and wondered how feeble his explanation had sounded.

He was saved from any immediate questioning by the sound of footsteps on the entrance porch. The girls turned toward the door. Judd Mason came inside, carrying a wallet in his hand. The light-brown leather case was splotched with a dark stain.

"Found it in the grass on the other side of the house. Got stained a bit from the dew."

Curt took the wallet, not looking at him. No one spoke. They watched him open it and examine its separate compartments. Only his money was missing. The other contents remained intact.

"Too bad," said Mason. "No signs of anybody, whoever it was." He rubbed blunt-nailed fingers across his broken nose. "Want me to call the cops?"

Curt shook his head. "Not much use by now."

"But your money's gone," said Carol Mason.

"I've still got a few dollars in my pants pocket." Although he spoke to her, he watched her father. But the expressionless face told him nothing. He said, "I'll manage. I'll be all right in a minute."

Janet Craig spoke up, timidly, from the confines of her robe. "What kind of noise was it, Mr. Prentice?"

"It's hard to explain." He frowned down at the floor, avoiding looking at them. "Someone seemed to be prowling around the house, so I got up and went outside. I couldn't see anyone. In fact, I didn't see anyone before or after I was hit."

Judd Mason said, "You should've called me first."

"I can see that now."

The silence became disquieting.

"Well, if there's nothing more we can do, I suggest we all try to get some sleep." Carol Mason took the folded blanket from the end of the divan and shook it out and draped it over him. "Especially you, Mr. Prentice."

Janet Craig said, "Shouldn't we call the police?"

"That's up to Prentice," said Mason.

"Not now." Suddenly he was too tired to protest whatever happened. "Maybe in the morning . . ."

Despite himself, his eyes closed as Carol Mason tucked the blanket about him. He could sense them looking down at him. Then, one by one, they left the room — first Janet Craig, then Judd Mason. He lay still, his eyes closed, conscious of Carol Mason hovering over him. A long moment passed. Her fingers brushed gently and coolly across his forehead. Then she turned away and went into her room.

Lying motionless in the dark, listening to the pumping of blood in his ears, he cursed himself for his carelessness. He had set himself up like a target in a shooting gallery.

He drifted into complete and dreamless sleep, and then, almost as if there had been no transition at all, he awakened to sunlight and the sounds of someone working in the kitchen.

He was alert to his surroundings the moment he opened his eyes and saw sunlight washed in a gilt rhomboid on the ochre carpeting. A bird sang outside, shrill, chirping, repetitious. His head rocked with sudden, cleaving

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pressure when he moved, but after the first sickening twinge he was able to sit up and swing his feet to the floor.

Judd Mason came into the room in his shirt sleeves, his collar still open around his thick neck.

"How you feel?"

"All right, I guess." Curt looked at his wrist watch. It was eight-thirty. "Everybody up?"

"Yeah. The girls're fixing breakfast." The sharp, predatory eyes watched him closely. "You feel like eating?"

He had to resist a sudden trembling, unable to answer. It was a delayed reaction, as though his nerves were belatedly aware of the man looking down at him. Anger burned dully in his throat. He had no right to sit calmly and unconcernedly, talking to the man he had sworn to kill. Fay was dead — Alec was dead . . . the world was empty without them. The bitter morning loneliness that suddenly swept through him was part of the delayed reaction. The first minutes after waking were always the worst of all.

"You hungry, Prentice?"

His hand tensed instinctively, ready to reach for the automatic in his coat. *"M.'s principal source of graft came from shaking down prostitutes; an expert in framing young girls . . ."* Then his fingers went slack against his thigh. He had remembered everything except the theft of his Luger.

He made himself answer casually, "I could do with some coffee."

It was nearing nine-fifteen when they rose from the table.

"I'll see you all later," said Mason. "I've got some things to do this morning."

They listened to his car back noisily out of the garage and down the driveway.

"We don't have to be at the gallery until ten," said Carol. "Janet's bus leaves for Santa Barbara at ten twenty-five."

The strained atmosphere between the two girls seemed less noticeable. He wondered if he were less sensitive to it or if it had actually diminished overnight.

He said, "I can drive her to the terminal," and then stopped. "If my car's still in that parking lot . . ."

Carol Mason laughed. "It will be." Then she said, "But what about your appointment with Mr. Sorel?"

"I didn't know you knew about it."

"He told me last night."

He shrugged. "I'd forgotten all about it. Ten-fifteen, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Janet Craig joined them. "You don't need to bother. I'd like to get there early and check my bags and pick up a magazine or two, but I want to stop at the gallery first."

"I can still drive you," he said. "I can get back by ten-fifteen."

It was after nine-thirty by the time the girls had cleared the table and washed the breakfast dishes. He pulled down the garage door after Carol Mason had backed the car into the driveway and then stood looking at the grass where he had lain unconscious between the concrete tracks. He flushed with anger at the thought of his stupidity and then went quickly toward the car, wondering who had hit him and stolen his money and his automatic.

Who could have done it? For what reason?

Their drive into Hollywood was a

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silent one. Janet Craig appeared to be habitually mute, and Carol Mason was occupied with the hazards of driving through the morning traffic. At the fountain intersection of Los Feliz and Riverside Drive she barely avoided colliding with a delivery truck which made a left turn in front of her without warning. The sudden stop threw them forward on the seat. She let the truck go past her and then picked up speed without comment from any one.

A drab brown sedan resumed speed half a block behind them.

"I'll drop you off here," said Carol Mason. "I'm going to park around the block."

They had reached the new gallery on Sunset Boulevard.

"All right," he said, opening the door. "I'll pick my car up and then drive right back."

He went around the coupé to take Janet Craig's bags from the rear compartment and carried them across the sidewalk to the locked door, and then walked briskly down the street towards the parking lot where he had left his car. The overalled youth took his car keys and slouched away, whistling off-key. The lot was already half-filled. His car came swiftly down the lane toward him and stopped with a rocking flourish.

"Thanks." He slid behind the wheel. "I got tied up."

"Yeah. I reckon y'did, mac. That's another fifteen cents — for this mornin'."

The added payment left two dimes and a ten dollar bill in his pocket. He put the bill in his wallet and then pulled away into traffic, driving around the block to be able to park outside the gallery. Janet Craig was already waiting outside the ferro-concrete façade, her luggage on the sidewalk beside her. He double-parked, leaving his motor running, picked up her bags and put them inside the car. She joined him on the front seat without a word and let him drive away from the gallery for a block before she directed him to the bus terminal on Cahuenga Boulevard.

Her silence was frustrating. At first he thought to ask her about Mason — the questions he was unable to ask Carol Mason should have come easily with a stranger — but the words refused to come. The girl seemed to absorb and generate silence in an unending cycle. The presence of another failed to stimulate her into speech, and her own presence discouraged any gesture toward conversation.

At the bus terminal she refused to let him help her with her luggage.

"Thank you, Mr. Prentice. Good-by."

"Good-by," he said. "Have a good vacation."

Her wan, unenthusiastic smile stayed with him only a few seconds after he drove away from the big blue-and-gray building. Completely negative, he thought — how to be a nonentity in ten easy lessons. She projected a flat, colorless quality with the care most girls devoted to making themselves noticed. In another two blocks he had forgotten her.

He was able to park near Sorel & Bradford, pulling into a vacated space at the curb. The gallery was less than half a block away. He walked back to it, wondering what Victor Sorel would have to say to him, wondering why he was troubling to keep the appointment. It seemed absurd to be going through

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the motions of being interested in finding work when he knew his life would be finished the moment he had carried out the job he had set himself to do. His question still remained unanswered when he had reached the plate-glass door.

Carol Mason was working alone inside the gallery.

"Mr. Sorel hasn't come in yet," she said. "It's only a little after ten, though. He's never late."

The caterers had removed most of the traces of the party, but she moved around the long quiet room, rearranging the pale yellow leather chairs and straightening an occasional piece of sculpture on its pedestal.

The plate-glass door swung open, admitting a gust of sound from the street.

"Good morning," said Victor Sorel. "Hello, there, Prentice, so sorry to keep you waiting . . ."

They went into the rear office. It was still cluttered with the disorder of moving day — filing boxes were stacked in haphazard piles, pictures leaned against the wall, chairs were pushed awkwardly into corners and burdened with miscellaneous office supplies. Sorel pulled up a pale-yellow leather arm chair for Curt and then sat down behind a bleached mahogany desk in the corner. On the wall behind him the long swoop hand of a Western Union clock swung noiselessly around its beveled dial.

"So you're new in Hollywood . . ."

"Yes."

"I believe you said you had done commercial work?"

"I did before I went into uniform."

"Occasionally I get calls from agency people out here, but nothing has come in for a month or so. What I had in mind yesterday, however, when I saw that sketch of yours — and I trust you won't be insulted when I tell you ——"

"I don't insult too easily."

Sorel smiled and then reached into his desk. "Well, I have Lawlor's address here . . ." He rummaged in the wide middle drawer, seeking what he wanted amid a litter of papers, pencils, envelopes, staplers, paper slips. "You can see we've only just moved, can't you? I feel as though my entire life is disorganized. Everything is completely confused here, and outside I'm equally lost without my car. It's been missing for several days now."

"Yes, so Miss Mason told me yesterday."

"I want to find Lawlor's address for you — although I may be going at the matter backwards ——"

Curt waited indifferently, looking up at the clock. It was ten-twenty — time was still slipping away from him. Then the telephone rang as Sorel pulled the drawer out a little further. It served to pin him in his swivel chair. He gestured helplessly at the shrilling instrument on the far corner of the desk.

"Would you mind answering that, please?"

Curt lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

"M'sieu Sorel, please."

"Just a moment . . ." He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "Are you supposed to be in?"

"Who is it?"

"A woman. She sounds French."

"French? Not my sister, is it?"

Curt took his hand from the perforated diaphragm. "Who is this?"

"Lenore Sorel. I wish to speak with my brother. It is most important."

He handed the instrument across

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the desk. "Miss Sorel. She says it's urgent."

"Thank you." Rubbing his knuckles absently against his thin mustache, Sorel placed the receiver against his left ear. "Hello, Lenore? . . . yes, Mr. Prentice — I don't think you met him yesterday——" Then his voice and manner abruptly changed. "What's that?" He listened a moment, and then his hands moved expressively, as if he were talking to his sister face to face. "Lenore, please . . . there is no need to dramatize . . . but I assure you . . ." He sighed, listening in resigned silence. "Very well, then . . . yes, as soon as possible. Mason isn't here for the time being, and Carol went on an errand for me — but just as soon . . . yes, dear — the moment one or the other comes back . . ."

Curt watched him hang up and then shake his head slightly from side to side in faint perturbation.

"I hope you will excuse the interruption. Unfortunately my sister is going through a somewhat difficult period. She has a — a kind of complex, you might say. Ever since we left France and came home . . . well, her imagination — she imagines she's followed when she goes on the street . . . that sort of thing. It has no basis in fact, and yet it's disturbingly real to Lenore." The dapper, graying man shook his head. "I'm sure I don't know what to do by now." His manicured fingers drummed worriedly on the desk. "Even if I go home and try to reassure her — she says someone is watching the apartment — by the time I call a cab and then try to get back here . . . I don't see myself accomplishing very much today."

"I'll drive you if you like."

"Oh, no. Thank you, Prentice, but I couldn't impose on you."

"You're not imposing. I wouldn't have offered to do it if I didn't want to."

"We-ell, perhaps — when Carol returns . . ." Sorel pushed the drawer shut and leaned forward. "I can't find Lawlor's address, but perhaps we can drive past his place on our way home." He smiled, shrugging. "For that matter, you may not care for the job. It's a little out of the ordinary."

"How much out of the ordinary?"

"Well, there's an amusement arcade on Cahuenga. The proprietor buys an occasional print and picture from me, though you'd never suspect he had any taste for art to look at him. He has a caricature concession, but his last man left him over the week-end. Last Friday, I believe. Lawlor asked me if I could recommend anyone. The charge is two dollars per sketch, and it's split equally between you and Lawlor."

"I've done caricaturing," Curt said slowly. "Doodling, of course, more than anything else. I've never thought of it as a lifetime job."

"Of course not. But if you're looking for something to tide you over — and if you've been out of practice for some time — it might be good experience for you. You'd soon recover your old facility."

Curt nodded. "That's true . . ."

A muted buzzer rasped somewhere in the office.

"Someone just came in," Sorel said, rising. "I'd better see who it is."

The newcomer was Carol Mason. She came toward them, a roll of canvas under her arm, walking again as Fay had always walked, directly and quickly toward them. But Fay had never worn that kind of blue dress — that kind of Mandarin coat . . .

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"Please take over for the next half hour or so. My sister called a few minutes ago, and I promised to go home the moment I was free."

"I hope nothing's wrong, Mr. Sorel?"

"No, no — nothing serious. Mr. Prentice has been kind enough to offer to drive me. Don't bother to have any calls transferred to the apartment."

Her faint smile as they left was one of inquiry rather than encouragement. Curt kept his face carefully blank. There could be no ties between them. Her father had been momentarily reprieved — not pardoned.

Outside the forenoon warmth of late spring was already approaching the blast furnace heat of mid-afternoon. They drove north on Cahuenga, crossing Hollywood Boulevard and then turning right on Franklin Avenue, driving between the rows of tall palm trees. Luck was with them. There was an open parking space outside the apartment house. Curt backed into it as a brown sedan swerved to the left and shot past him, barely missing his rear fender.

"I'll wait until you're ready to go back."

"Not at all," said the older man. "Come up with me. I'd like Lenore to meet you."

"But if she's upset ——"

"Frankly, my friend, if you're with me, things will be much easier. Meeting you will help to distract her. No woman can afford to be overwrought when confronted with her social responsibilities as a hostess."

Shrugging, Curt joined him on the sidewalk and locked the car. The building was small, but its limestone façade had an air of luxury about it. They entered the revolving door. The foyer had a certain functional grace. Someone had ruthlessly eschewed the gaudy movie cathedral appointments seen in most lobbies. A self-service elevator took them slowly and quietly to the third floor, and they emerged into a quiet hallway.

They walked in step along the corridor, treading on soft maroon carpeting. Sorel halted at the last door on the right. He knocked, automatically reaching for his keys. There was no immediate answer. He tried the handle and then took his keys from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"Please come in," he invited. "I won't keep you too long."

But Curt stood frozen on the threshold.

A woman in a sheer black negligee lay in a sprawled heap on the blue-gray chenille carpet. Her thin body seemed pitifully fragile. A shiny red skein of blood marked her creamy cheek and throat.

It was Lenore Sorel, and she was obviously dead.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Lenore Sorel was shot through the right side of the head," said Detective-Lieutenant Francis Hesbie. "It was a rimless .30-caliber cartridge. Maybe from a Luger automatic, according to our ballistics man. We won't know for sure until we've found the gun . . ." He spoke with a quiet, easy restraint close to impersonality — a big-shouldered, grizzled man in his late forties. His

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face was carelessly assembled. Listening to the quiet voice, standing apart from them at the window, Curt watched Victor Sorel with cold detachment. The dapper little man seemed dazed with shock; his unobtrusive elegance had a crumpled quality. He sat in a blue velour wing chair under an abstract painting in reds and blues, sitting quite still, leaning forward a little, his hands hanging limply between his knees.

Lieutenant Hesbie lighted a cigarette. His striking match seemed to crackle with unusual loudness in the quiet room. Victor Sorel was oblivious to the sound. "I'll have to ask you some questions . . ." After waiting in vain for the little art dealer to answer him, he turned his head casually towards Curt at the window. "Why'd you come to Hollywood?"

"I was tired of Chicago, like a lot of people. I thought my chances here might be better, like a lot of others. At least it's warmer here."

Hesbie took in smoke and released it in thin gray jets through his nostrils. "An artist, eh?"

"I hope to get back to it now I'm out of the service."

"How'd you happen to pick Sorel & Bradford to visit?"

"I was looking for a man named Henry Mason. I understood he worked in one of the galleries along Sunset Boulevard. Sorel & Bradford was the first gallery I tried."

"What does this Mason do? Why'd you want to see him?"

The lie came glibly. "A friend of mine in Chicago told me about him. He said maybe I could bunk with Mason until I got settled. But the Mason at Mr. Sorel's place proved to be someone else."

"You stayed, though?"

"Because of my picture — as I've already told you . . ."

"Yeah."

"Why do you want to know all this?"

"No special reason," said Hesbie, blowing a wobbling smoke ring. "Do you know of anybody who'd want to kill your sister, Mr. Sorel?"

Sorel shook his head helplessly. "No one — no one at all . . ."

In the pause that followed Curt said slowly. "How about yesterday?"

Sorel looked up at him with clouded eyes. "What?"

"Simon Cotton had a scene with your sister."

Hesbie still sat in his chair with negligent ease, but his question came out before Sorel could react. "What was that about, Mr. Sorel?"

"Well, my sister made some rather disparaging remarks about Cotton's work. He's an artist whose paintings Bradford and I feature. In fact, we're holding a one-man exhibit of his work as part of the gala opening of our new gallery. He's highly egocentric and quite vain. He became involved in an embarrassing scene with Lenore."

"Where's he live?"

"In West Hollywood — north of the strip ——" Then Sorel checked himself and spread his hands in unhappy protest. "But I'm sure Cotton would never ——"

"We'll merely want to talk to him," said Hesbie. "Anybody else?"

"No one I can think of. And I'm certain Cotton would never commit murder. It's really unthinkable."

"We're not saying he did. We merely want to question him. If he can give an account of his movements at the time your sister was being shot, we'll give

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him a clean bill of health." Hesbie stood up, and suddenly he seemed to change in appearance. He had a long trunk which gave him the illusion of considerable height when he was sitting. Standing, he was far short of six feet. "How about the other people you and your sister know, Mr. Sorel — the ones at the party, for instance . . ."

"They were friends, acquaintances, good customers. Some of them are all one and the same."

"I'd like their names. Start with your partner and your employees."

"Well, Lloyd Bradford's my partner. We've been in business together since 1942. That was the year my sister and I came back home. Lloyd's thirty-five — a native Californian. His family's rather wealthy. He lives alone in Hollywood."

"What was his relation to your sister?"

Sorel stiffened. "Must you ask these questions?"

"She's been murdered, Mr. Sorel. We have to ask questions to find out who did it."

"They were good friends. No more than that."

"What about your employees?"

"We have three. Judd Mason, Carol Mason, Janet Craig."

Alone at the window, hands clasped behind his back, Curt involuntarily tightened his fingers, digging his nails into his palms. The mere mention of Mason's name brought the darting flame of recrimination under his skin. Lenore Sorel was dead, but Mason still lived.

"What does Mason do?"

"He's our watchman and handyman. He was on the Chicago police force some years ago, I believe. My partner hired him to work at the gallery.

"Carol Mason's his daughter?"

"Yes."

"Was Mason hired before his daughter?"

"No, I'd hired Miss Mason. Then Lloyd Bradford learned about her father some six months later."

"Who's Janet Craig?"

"My secretary. She left for a vacation this morning."

About to walk toward the window, Hesbie stopped short. "This morning?"

"I drove her down to the bus terminal," Curt said. "She rooms with the Masons in Glendale. I drove down with the two girls after breakfast and picked up my car from the parking lot and drove her to the station."

"What time was that?"

"Between ten and ten after."

"When was she scheduled to leave?"

"Ten-twenty-five."

"What time did you say your sister called you, Mr. Sorel?"

"It was ten-twenty," Curt said. "I happened to be looking at the clock when the 'phone rang."

Hesbie grunted. "I see."

"You're not suggesting Miss Craig had anything to do with this?" Sorel asked quietly.

"I don't know."

"But it would have been impossible for her to leave the terminal and get here to the apartment and then back again to the terminal between ten-ten and ten-twenty-five."

"If she caught the bus," said Hesbie. "What were their relations?"

"Virtually non-existent. Miss Craig is highly introverted — a model employee . . . but not at all assertive. I doubt if Lenore ever did more than pass the time of day with her."

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"Well, we can check on that bus trip of hers. Give me her description, and I'll send a man over to the terminal."

"I trust we won't have to disturb her," said Sorel. "She's been working quite hard these past few months. This vacation means a great deal to her."

"We'll see. We'll be only too glad to take her off our list if we know for sure she caught that bus. The shorter our list the better our chances." The detective pushed his panama back from his forehead and then teetered gently on his toes in front of the fireplace. "Who else was at your party? What other close friends?"

"Well, there was Claude Guthrie. He's one of our best patrons, and he's invested money in our firm. He's thirty-ish — independently wealthy." Sorel frowned, trying to remember. "The others were casual acquaintances for the most part. Carol Mason could help you with them. She made up the invitation list."

"There was Nedda Kendall," Curt said.

Hesbie came down on his heels. "Who's she?"

"Another patron," said Sorel. "More than that, actually. She's been a good friend of the firm for some time."

"Well, I guess that's all for now," said Hesbie. "We'll check on all these people and find out what they were doing this morning. I'll probably want that guest list from your girl, too." He looked at Curt. "Where you going to stay, Prentice? At the Masons?"

"I don't think so. I'm going to look for a hotel room today."

"Get in touch with me when you do. You'll have to testify at the inquest."

"All right."

Victor Sorel looked up, his mouth twitching slightly under his thin mustache. "I won't be going back to the gallery. If you'd be kind enough to notify Lloyd Bradford ——"

"Of course," Curt said. "I'll go right over there."

Opening the door, he resisted a sudden impulse to step around the invisible obstruction of the body which had been removed from the carpet. Then he was outside, walking softly and quickly along the maroon carpeted corridor, his right hand moving into his coat pocket for the first time. He was alone in the descending elevator before he took the tie clasp from his coat and looked at it in his palm. It was a silver serpent design — the clasp he had seen clipped to Judd Mason's shirt. He knew he should have given it to Hesbie — he should never have picked it up when he noticed its dull gleam between the cushions on the divan . . . but compulsion rather than impulse had prompted him to slip it into his pocket. He felt as though he had been forced to do it.

Why had he hidden the tie clasp from Hesbie? Why hadn't he turned it over to the detective as a clue pointing directly at Mason?

Immediately he knew the answer, though it would have been meaningless to a stranger. His vengeance had to be his own personal revenge. Perhaps the police would find Mason guilty long before he added a single scrap of evidence to the clue he had withheld from them, but he had to work alone until that happened. A bitter, unshakable stubbornness inside him made cooperation with them out of the question. His motivations were diametrically opposed to the duties of a responsible citizen. He had embarked on a vendetta. His revenge and his methods of pursuing it

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had to be private.

But why should he want Mason to be guilty? Why should it matter after what he had done to Fay and Alec?

Again the answer came to him, sharp and sudden as the horn blast of the convertible cutting in front of him in the thickening traffic on Franklin Avenue. If Mason were guilty, then someone else would snuff out his life for him. It meant Mason would pay the penalty for Fay and Alec, but his own hands would be bloodless. The state of California would exact his revenge for him.

Instantly his confusion and indecision dropped away from him. For the first time he saw why he had failed to kill his enemy the moment he met him. He saw why he had driven by car from Chicago rather than flying or taking a fast train. Subconsciously he had been trying to postpone the act of execution. He had seen too much killing and had committed too much killing under the sanction of the uniform which legalized mass murder in the twentieth century. Despite the urgency of his intent, it had become impossible for him to kill an individual in cold blood. Weakness or not, the ability was lacking in him — but if he could obtain his revenge legally . . .

Yet was he basing his supposition merely on the tie clasp?

Hesbie had said the murder weapon might have been a Luger — which was reason enough to involve Mason and reason enough for concern on his own part. If it were his Luger — if it had been Mason who had attacked and robbed him in the dark — its ownership could easily be traced to him. But there could be no other alternative. It had to be Mason. The man had to be guilty — because if he were innocent he might easily escape the penalty for Fay's death.

The thought came with cruel, disturbing swiftness. It was the first time he had faced the unbearable truth. The will to murder was a counterfeit drive inside him — a sham concoction of words and images . . . an empty substitute for the destructive force that goaded the truly homicidal personality into irrevocable action.

"M. accused by Julia Harlan, prostitute, of extortion in 1943; blackmail put him in business of pandering while still on police force . . ."

He had made up his mind by the time he reached the gallery. Mason had to be found guilty, and he, Curt Prentice, war veteran, would-be artist, incapable of murder, had to amass the proof and burden of guilt.

As he crossed the sidewalk, a harsh grating of fenders and bumpers behind him brought his head around in concern for the car he had parked at the curb. It was unharmed. A white-haired woman in a twenty-year-old Essex sedan several cars away was crashing her way into a cramped parking space. Her clumsy maneuvering caused the inner lane of westbound cars to swerve outward in self-defence. Among them was a dark-brown sedan. The sight of it brought a slight frown of puzzlement. It was like the car which had barely avoided grazing his fender outside the Sorels' apartment building — like the car he had seen parked outside the Mason bungalow in Glendale . . .

Carol Mason came toward him the moment the door sighed shut behind him.

"Mr. Sorel didn't come back too?"

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"No." He wondered if his repressed agitation were at all apparent to her. "Is Bradford in?"

"He's in back with my father," she said. "I have your sketch back there on Janet's desk ——"

"I'd like to see both of them."

She seemed puzzled by his brusqueness, but she accompanied him in silence to the rear office.

Lloyd Bradford was sitting behind the desk where Sorel had taken the call from his sister. His big body lounged awkwardly in the swivel chair; he wore his brown lightweight tweeds with the unstylish carelessness of a boy dressed for Sunday school. Judd Mason was standing in the doorway of the second office, leaning against the jamb. He still wore his gray sharkskin suit. His tight, molded face was expressionless. A toothpick hung from his closed lips.

"Hello, there . . ." Bradford waved at the pale yellow leather arm chair in front of the desk. "Sit down."

"I won't be staying," Curt said. "Sorel asked me to come back and tell you what's happened."

The pale blue eyes under the sandy brows narrowed, arrested by the gravity of his tone. "What's up?"

"Sorel won't be coming back today." He hesitated and then decided to forego polite circumlocution. "We found his sister dead in their apartment."

Bradford started. "Good God!"

Carol Mason whispered, horrified, "Oh, no!"

The man lounging in the doorway remained motionless. "How'd it happen, Prentice?"

"She'd been murdered," Curt said. "Shot through the head."

Carol Mason looked at him with the dazed incredulity of a shocked child. He kept his eyes on the man in the doorway, watching the ruled mouth under the clipped mustache, the shiny brown eyes under the thick dark brows. Judd Mason remained still and expressionless.

"Murdered," he said unemotionally. "Too bad."

Still watching him, Curt touched the serpent tie clasp in his pocket. Passport to oblivion, he thought — and then realized other thoughts were demanding his attention. He wondered why Sorel had neglected to tell Hesbie about his sister's belief that she had been watched and followed by a person or persons unknown, and then he found himself thinking about the brown sedan once again.

Somehow he felt he had seen the car elsewhere before. He wished he had thought to look at its driver. If the driver had been the same each time — if by some remote chance he had recognized him or her . . . but it was of minor importance. He had to start establishing proof of murder which would send the man lounging in the doorway to the state gas chamber.

CHAPTER SIX

THE amusement arcade occupied the width of two ordinary store fronts and was half as long in depth. The din of its gaudy juke boxes seemed to claw the air with grotesque neon talons behind its raised shutters. Curt faced Fergus

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Lawlor in a little booth which surveyed the entire floor from the righthand corner adjoining the entrance of the arcade.

"So Sorel told you to come over . . ."

The man's bulk seemed to fill the flimsy cubicle, dwarfing the table bearing the esoteric patterns of a solitaire hand, but his big frame was flabby with age rather than fat. There was an air of disuse about him, as though he were a grotesque store window dummy someone had ordered made and then had neglected to pick up.

Curt nodded. "When do you want me to start?"

"Well, there's nothing much doing during the day. Just evenings and all day Saturdays, Sundays and holidays. You can start tonight, eight until midnight."

"I'll be here," Curt said — "if I can find myself a hotel room."

"Where you staying now?"

"I'm not. I came into town Monday afternoon, and someone put me up overnight. I slept in my car last night. Now I need a regular place to stay for a while."

Lawlor half-closed his eyes under his shaggy white brows and then reached down under the table and brought up a telephone from the floor and silently dialed a number.

"Matt . . . yeah — Matt Hedrick . . ." He waited, eyes still half-closed, his soft sloping chest rising and falling with his breathing. "Matt — Ferg Lawlor . . . I got a boy here who starts work in my joint tonight — I need a roof over his head beginning as of now . . ." He listened while the line crackled with speech. "Sure, sure, I know — only he's a refined artist type boy . . . yeah . . . he'll be there." He dropped the receiver on its pedestal. "The Pilgrim Hotel on Highland. Tell 'em Ferg Lawlor sent you over."

"All right," Curt said. "Thanks."

He drove down Hollywood Boulevard in the bright sunlight and then found the Pilgrim Hotel on Highland Avenue and parked the car in a nearby parking lot.

Taking his suitcase from the luggage compartment, he walked back to the hotel. Its façade was nondescript, no more than a converted store front. The narrow lobby was gloomy and cool, like an old-fashioned mortuary; it was empty of loungers. He went past the black leather chairs and the wicker tables littered with old magazines and set his valise down in front of the registry counter. A skinny, middle-aged clerk in a black alpaca jacket patched at the elbows looked up from a small switchboard in the corner and then rose and came forward with the infinite patience of the arthritic.

"Ferg Lawlor sent me over. He just arranged a room for me."

"Yeah?" The clerk looked at him with the sad, rheumy eyes of an old spaniel and then thumbed through a thin stack of cards behind the desk blotter. "Yeah . . ." He put the cards down. "Name?"

"Curt Prentice." He signed the register. "Do you have a garage?"

"You can make parking arrangements with the lot down the block." The clerk gave him his room key with a palsied, fleshless hand. "You're in 219. We're short of help right now. You'll have to go up yourself."

His room was in the rear of the building, away from the traffic noises of Highland Avenue, claustrophobic as a third-class steamer cabin, cheerful as a

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cell. The sunlight revealed a single bed, a chest of drawers, a shoddy easy chair, a clothes closet and a door opening on the bathroom. He let his clothes fall to the floor as he undressed and then went into the bathroom and shaved and took a brisk shower.

When he finished, he opened up his suitcase for clean shorts and socks and a shirt. He put on the socks and the shorts and then sat beside the opened valise on the bed, gazing with bleak derision at its contents. He had come to kill a man and immediately surrender to the police, and yet he had furnished himself with a complete change of clothes. From the first he had subconsciously acted in opposition to his intent. The realization burned accusingly inside him. He reached into a side compartment of the valise and took out two newspaper clippings worn thin with use.

OFFICER COMMENDED BY JURY

A coroner's jury returned a "justifiable homicide" verdict today and recommended that Officer Judd Mason be commended for his action in killing Alec Sandford, 27, last April 23.

Mason, attached to the vice squad bureau, testified he shot Sanford in an alley in the rear of 600 South State Street when he made a break for freedom as Mason was picking him up for questioning.

Sanford brings to seven the number of suspects fatally shot by Mason in the line of duty since 1934.

The last paragraph of the squib was underlined in black pencil. The second clipping was shorter than the first.

GIRL SUICIDE

The body of a girl identified as Fay Prentice, 22, wife of Pfc Curt Prentice, now on duty in the ETO, was taken from the Chicago River early today. No motives for her suicide have been discovered by police. The body has not yet been claimed by relatives.

His hands were beginning to shake. He returned the clippings to the compartment and then felt under a folded shirt for the sketch he had forgotten until he saw it without warning in the gallery on Sunset Boulevard. It was another symbol of the brave new world — a man fought for the guarantee of a peaceful life . . . and then was permitted to hold a pencil portrait of his dead wife in his hands.

Suddenly he ripped the picture from corner to corner. Then he tore the rough triangles into meaningless pieces and dropped the scraps in the waste basket between the bed and the easy chair. Hot tears pricked his eyes. He leaned forward, pressing the heels of his hands against the bony rims of his eye sockets.

Kill him, he thought — *kill him* . . .

Rising from the bed, he hung his discarded suit on a hanger and took a blue flannel coat and trousers from the valise. He dressed quickly and silently, trying not to think. It was six-thirty. He locked his door and went downstairs to the street and stopped for a paper at the corner.

REPATRIATE BEAUTY SLAIN. POLICE SEEK MISSING ARTIST

He read the front page story while he ate alone in a nearby restaurant. He had been eating and reading for some time before he became aware that someone was watching him. It was the sensation he had experienced during the party at the gallery. His nerves tightened. He looked up with casual swiftness. But no one turned away in sudden embarrass-

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ment. His fellow diners were either intent on eating or hidden behind their own newspapers. Frayed blue serge cuffs were all that were visible of the customer reading at a table halfway across the restaurant from him. He turned back to his coffee, annoyed, disconcerted, knowing he had no reason to suspect anyone of watching him.

When he entered the amusement arcade, the din of the juke boxes had increased. Ferg Lawlor was sitting in his booth, big, flabby, white-haired, as though he had remained there in the same position since late afternoon. Even the solitaire hand seemed unchanged. They nodded. Curt took up his place in the corner and set out his chalks and paper.

Customers came almost immediately. He did a three-quarter face of one man — an ideal model for caricature . . . red-cheeked, big-nosed, double-chinned. His success with his first sketch led to three more orders from his subject's companions.

The rifles cracked steadily at the shooting gallery.

He became absorbed in his work, giving himself over in complete concentration to the job at hand. The simple act of creation was at once soothing and stimulating. His nerves relaxed. It was the first creative work he had done since he had heard about Fay's death.

He was drawing a young British soldier when he first noticed Judd Mason at the shooting gallery, watching him, rifle in hand. Their eyes met, but no sign of recognition passed between them. A sudden thought touched him, briefly, coldly — there was something inexpressibly menacing about Mason as he stood there, as if he had to repress a desire to sight the rifle toward the corner booth. Then the hunchbacked attendant in the shooting concession mumbled something to him. The man turned away and took deliberate aim at the moving metal targets.

It was after ten before Mason left the arcade.

Ferg Lawlor moved lumberingly from his booth. "How's it coming, son?"

"Not bad. I've done seven of them so far. Beginner's luck."

"Could be."

"Does Mason come in here often?"

"Who?"

"Judd Mason — the marksman . . ."

"Oh him," the big man rumbled. "From Sorel's place?"

Curt nodded.

"Yeah, he's a regular. Comes in every night about this time. He's a deadeye dick with that rifle."

"I wonder where he learned to shoot that well?"

"He used to be a cop." The growled words took on unusual opprobrium as Lawlor lumbered back to his booth. "He's a lousy ex-cop."

Curt frowned, watching him move into his booth with the waddling slowness of an aging elephant. Only the swinging rope of a tail was needed to complete the illusion. He hadn't considered Lawlor as a source of information about Mason. It opened up new possibilities. He wondered how much the white-haired man knew and how best to learn it from him. If Lawlor . .

He cut short his speculation, watching Carol Mason come quickly and nervously into the arcade, wearing the jonquil-yellow suit she had worn the first time he met her. She looked toward the shooting concession. He raised h

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hand, attracting her attention. She came rapidly toward him.

"Oh, hello," she said, white-faced, ill-at-ease. "Have you seen my father?"

"He left about five minutes ago."

"Oh." Her eyes seemed distortedly large and defenseless in her white face. "I'd hoped I'd catch him."

"Something wrong?"

She looked at him, twisting her hands in uncontrollable nervousness. "Yes, there is. I wanted to tell him ——"

"Tell him what?"

"I've been working late. The police just phoned in. Janet Craig's dead."

He started. "What?"

"Her body's been found on the beach at Santa Barbara. She drowned either last night or early this morning they said.

To his amazement tears suddenly appeared in her eyes.

"It's all my fault," she whispered in anguish. "It's my fault. I'm to blame. It's all my fault."

Before he could answer she turned blindly from him and hurried into the street.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The pavement outside the unadorned façade was bare of loungers and curiosity-mongers. It surprised him — he had half-expected to see a little group blocking the sidewalk in ghoulish inquisitiveness. The nichelike display windows seemed different as he pushed open the glass door. Then he saw why — the Cotton portrait and landscape had been taken down. Inside, the same was true. The one-man exhibit had been removed from the waxed pine walls.

Carol Mason came toward him, again in her aqua-blue dress. It seemed different at first glance — she had added a wide leather belt to the waist. Her face was white. The wan shadows of a sleepless night underlined her hazel eyes.

"Hello," he said. "Is Sorel in?"

"Not yet." Her voice was low and controlled, touched with the huskiness that follows prolonged crying. "If you'd care to wait ——"

"Yes, thanks." He looked at her. "I'm sorry about Janet Craig."

"Yes."

"Does she have a family?"

"In Tacoma, Washington. They've been notified."

"It was an accident, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Had the police checked whether she caught that ten-twenty-five bus?"

She said, "Yes, she did," in a low, clipped voice and then, with an abortive little nervous gesture, "I — I don't have time to talk about it. I've a lot of work to do today."

He was about to detain her with another question, but the office door at the end of the long room opened. Nedda Kendall stood on the threshold. The blonde girl wore black. But not the drab, defeminizing black of mourning, he thought, watching her come toward them. It was the smart black of perennial fashion, svelte and flattering.

Carol Mason said, "I believe you've met . . ."

"Of course," said Nedda Kendall. "How do you do, Mr. Prentice?"

She put out her hand. Her fingers

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were curiously alive when he held them. She wore a ring whose ruby matched her lacquered nails. Her blue eyes appraised him with mocking candor.

"I understand you're working among us now, Mr. Prentice."

"Yes."

"A highly artistic job, isn't it?"

"I meet diamonds in the rough and polish them off."

"A pun," she murmured. "I love puns."

A lazy smile crossed her face and then disappeared. The street door had opened, briefly admitting the rushing sibilance of the boulevard traffic. Victor Sorel entered, followed by Lloyd Bradford. The dapper little man wore a dark suit of conservative cut. He looked weary — dark shadows underlined his eyes, like thumbed-in charcoal smudges. He nodded at Curt and then bent over Nedda Kendall and took her hand.

"I didn't know you'd come so early," he said.

"You don't mind?"

"No, no — of course not. Certainly not."

"The funeral plans haven't been changed?"

"No. It'll be at four, as Lenore would've wanted it done. Quickly and very quietly."

Lloyd Bradford nodded at Curt and touched the blonde girl's fingers in passing and went on to the rear office.

"I didn't realize the funeral services were today," Curt said. "I didn't mean to bother you. I thought I'd stop by and thank you for the job."

"Oh, yes," Sorel said politely. "Lawlor called me about you. I hope you don't find it too distasteful?"

"As a matter of fact, I like it."

"Have the police been in touch with you again?"

"Not since the inquest. I suppose I ought to notify Hesbie about my new address. I'm staying at the Pilgrim Hotel on Highland now."

"That's good to know," said Sorel. "Nothing new has developed. Hesbie tells me the police are still looking for Cotton."

"Do they think he did it?"

"I'm afraid I don't know," Sorel said wearily. "I'm so confused by all that's happened — first my sister, then the news about my secretary — my mind simply can't cope with it."

Nedda Kendall touched his hand. "You'll have to rest after it's over, Victor. Maybe you can go to Palm Springs for a little while."

The little picture dealer shook his head. "Not until Lenore . . ." His voice quivered. "I won't rest until we know who killed her."

It was an awkward, touching moment, and yet Curt felt irritability muddy his compassion for the graying man. His trip had been a waste of time. It was useless for him to stay. The funeral was all that mattered. It would be heartless of him to try to make inquiries about Judd Mason.

"I'll be leaving, then," he said. "If I can help in any way ——"

"Thank you. I trust I won't have to impose on you again."

"Good-by, then. Good-by, Miss Kendall."

"Good-by, Mr. Prentice."

The sound of her voice lingered in his mind as he moved toward the door. Then he slowed and halted. Judd Mason was entering the gallery. The man leaned his wiry strength against the hinged plate glass and then came face to face with Curt. The shiny anim

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eyes seemed to lack focus for a moment, possessing the unseeing brightness of glass nodules; then he nodded curtly and walked around him, moving toward the rear office.

Curt stood still momentarily, fighting the sick surge of helpless rage, feeling his hand attracted to his weaponless jacket with senseless compulsion. He could sense Sorel and Nedda Kendall watching him. He tightened his twisting nerves with ruthless deliberation and went outside.

Overwhelming fatigue assailed him on the street. He returned to the hotel and lay on the single bed in his room the rest of the afternoon.

At eight o'clock, obeying some obscure command of his senses, he reported at the arcade. Trade was slow. There were seldom more than three juke boxes competing for attention at one time. He had his first customer at eight-thirty and then waited another half hour before his second subject sat down in the straight-backed chair opposite his camp stool.

It was after nine before Judd Mason put in his appearance at the shooting gallery. Curt listened to the *ping!* of his bull's-eyes, repeated with monotonous regularity. At last he made himself walk over to him.

"You've a good eye."

"It'll do." Mason picked off his targets without a miss, toppling the metal ducks on the moving conveyor belt in a series of metallic rings followed by splashes as the cutouts fell into the water tank. "Others can do better."

All at once Curt knew he had been a fool to talk to him. His four words had been betrayal and appeasement. He had nothing to gain from any conversation with Mason. Psychologically he could only be the loser, troubled by a sense of guilt, blaming himself for his failure to strike out at his enemy. He watched another cutout duck fall backward into the water and then returned to his booth.

Promptly at midnight he put away his materials and walked toward the last narrow opening remaining in the shuttered entrance, nodding good night to the hunchback in the shooting gallery. There was little traffic. A long blue convertible at the curb arrested his attention for the split instant any American devotes to any shiny new car. Then he realized who sat behind the wheel.

Nedda Kendall murmured, "Hello," and then smiled coolly, impishly, looking more expensive than ever in a lustrous silver-fox cape. "Surprised?"

"A little."

"Get in," she said. "I want to talk to you."

Again he felt and resisted an instinctive attraction toward her. "What about?"

"Don't you want to talk to me?"

"I don't want to talk to anyone."

"Including Judd Mason?"

The careless query startled him. He knew it showed on his face.

She laughed. "You see, I know all about the two of you . . ."

"What does that mean?"

"You gave yourself away at the gallery this afternoon. Not that you said anything — but you have such eloquent shoulders . . ." She watched him. "Are you sure you don't want to come home with me and talk?" She waited a fractional moment. "We might even talk about Mason, mightn't we?"

Silently he opened the car door and

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sat down on the tartan plaid seat beside her.

Nothing more was said as she drove rapidly along Sunset Boulevard toward Beverly Hills. The dark brown sedan was only three cars behind them.

The blonde girl cut recklessly around the cars impeding their progress and shot forward, beating a red light. The brown sedan was left far behind them. Their speed increased. Then they left the boulevard for an upward winding drive, gliding with purring sibilance under the lacy silhouettes of pepper trees and weeping elms. At last she turned in at an opened iron gate and drove along a circular asphalt driveway under towering eucalyptuses and then pulled up outside the imposing façade of a big colonial house. Its white colonnades gleamed palely in the starlight.

The high entrance hall had an authentic eighteenth century flavor, colorlessly correct, an incongruous setting for her tropical smartness.

"We can talk down in the rumpus room."

They went down the hall, past several closed doors. Then she stopped before an open door and reached inside for the wall switch. Light splashed across the threshold, bringing her audacious profile into high relief. She gasped, her hand to her throat.

He said quickly, "What's wrong?" and then saw the reason for her start of surprise.

A man sat in an easy chair facing the door. His vast girth seemed to overflow the confining sides of the chair. He had obviously been waiting for her. It was Simon Cotton.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cotton still wore the lapelless burgundy-red jacket he had sported at the party opening. It was badly soiled, and one of the gilt buttons was missing. The leviathan-sized artist was drunk. His smoky gray eyes had a faint glaze filming them as he scowled at Curt.

"Who're you?"

"He's my guest, Simon. How did you get in here?"

"I walked in"—he lifted a pawlike hand with languid vagueness, too late to cover a hiccup—"my dear."

"You liar."

"Surely you don't expect me to waft this too, too solid flesh through yon too, too solid walls like a wisp of smoke?"

"How did you get in, Simon?" Nedda Kendall asked patiently.

"Through the back. You left a door open. Very trusting of you." He hiccupped again. "What day is it?"

"Thursday night. Friday morning by now."

"The same month?"

"You're not funny, Simon."

The spreading red shoulders shrugged in a seismic upheaval. "You overestimate my wit, my little pigeon."

Curt looked down at the swollen tightness of the vast oval face. "The police are looking for you, Cotton."

It took a little time for the intelligence to penetrate Cotton's alcoholic fog.

"What are you talking about?"

"You ought to know that," the blonde girl said lazily.

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"Be kind to me," the big man mumbled with childish petulance. "My nervous system has a short circuit. Several short circuits, if the truth be known. Only every other word breaks through to me."

"You might try sobering up."

"I don't want to sober up," he muttered. "After what that damnable Lenore said to me——"

"That's what we're talking about," Curt said. "Lenore Sorel's dead."

The glazed eyes cleared and then narrowed in sudden suspicion.

"She was buried this afternoon," said Nedda Kendall. "She's been murdered, Simon. The police are looking for you."

"Why me?"

"You quarreled with her before she was shot."

"Of course I quarreled with her!" the artist cried shrilly. "Did you expect me to submit to her insults in craven silence? Am I supposed to grovel while that queen cobra spits her venom at me?"

"She's dead. Simon."

"What of it? Do you think I'd try to kill her?" He shook his head. "Oh, no. The world is a brighter place if she's gone. You know that better than I, Nedda. But I'm the last individual in the world to risk my neck to liquidate her."

"You can tell that to the police," Curt said.

Sudden panic invaded the rubber-smooth face. "No!"

"They only want to question you — find out where you've been——"

"No!" Cotton lumbered clumsily to his feet, a ridiculous circus figure in his torn red coat. "I'm not letting them twist me up." A sly malevolence slithered across his face, like an oily film. "You're only trying to trick me——"

"Don't be a fool, Simon. You'll only do yourself harm if you try to run away. Tell the police where you've been and get it over with."

He backed slowly towards the open door. "I know what I'm doing."

"Curt, stop him!"

The fat man thrust his hand into his pocket. "I wouldn't advise it." A knife blade flashed in the light. It was a vicious weapon — the short, wicked blade shot out from its sheath at the touch of a spring mechanism. He held it in his palm with casual threat. "I visit strange places, my friend. My little gadget occasionally proves useful. I assure you I know how to use it."

"Don't let him go, Curt!"

"Must you urge heroism on your friend, my dear? Have you added blood lust to your other charming qualities?"

Curt stood motionless while the gargantuan artist retreated sidewise from the room. His footsteps quickened in lumbering haste in the hall. They heard the front door open and close behind him.

"What shall we do?" the blonde girl demanded. "Shall we call the police?"

"Why so anxious to put him behind bars?" he asked. "Do you think he killed her?"

Nedda Kendall shivered. "I don't know. I don't know what to think about it, but I hate to see him wandering around in that condition."

"Does he drink much?"

"He goes on periodic bouts — usually whenever anything happens to

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wound his ego. He disappears for days at a time and then turns up at his studio, absolutely mum about where he's been."

"Maybe that's because he can't remember. It might be why he doesn't want the police to get hold of him. Everything since he walked out of the party may be pretty much a blur to him."

She roamed nervously about the room, softly beating her hands together. "But if the police find out we didn't notify them——"

"Why should that worry you?"

"I don't want to get mixed up in this business any more than I can help it."

"You're interested in finding out who killed Lenore Sorel, aren't you?"

She snapped, "Of course I am!" and then flushed. "I simply don't want the police and the papers pawing through my private life. My personal life's my own. I don't care for notoriety." She shook her head, fluffing her hair back in a loose gold wave. "Simon couldn't have done it, anyway. Artists aren't killers."

He said, "I can name you a half dozen who have been, from Cellini down to our own time," but despite his lightness, his voice sounded tense and thin to his own ears. He shrugged. "You're probably right, though. Let's forget about it."

"Let's." Slipping off her fur cape, she dropped it over a chair. She still wore the black dress she had worn at the gallery. "A drink?"

"Thanks."

She poured brandy at the bar while he watched the tropical fish weave dexterously through the green water. Then she came toward him with his drink and took his hand and pulled him down beside her on the divan. They raised their glasses, looking at one another above the rims. Her eyes were flawlessly blue under her curved lashes. She would never know Fay's youthfulness, but her sexuality had a magnetic pull.

He said, deliberately impersonal, "You wanted to talk to me."

She smiled. "Yes."

"About Judd Mason."

"Must we talk about him?"

"Let's discuss Cotton, then."

A faint shadow of displeasure replaced the smile. "I thought we'd agreed——"

"Does he make a habit of wandering into your house?"

"We're friends."

"The artist and the lady," he said. "Goya and the Duchess of Alba."

"Damn you," she said softly. "You don't have to be insulting. Why do you go at things in such straight lines?"

"Things sometimes get done quicker that way."

"What's hurt you? What's made you so bitter?"

"Life in general."

"A girl, you mean." When he failed to answer, she watched him swirl the brandy in his glass. "What was she like?"

"She was young, and the world snapped her in two."

"While you were away?"

"Yes."

"And now she's dead?"

"Yes."

She touched his hand. "She's lucky."

"Why?"

"She's got you grieving for her. Nobody ever grieved for me."

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"Maybe you're not dead."

"I might as well be . . ." Her hand gently disengaged his fingers from his glass and placed it beside the telephone on the bamboo end-table beside the divan. "Or do you think you might kiss me?"

The touch of her hand made his arms tighten instinctively about her. It was the first time he had touched a woman in months. Her breath had a feathered touch against his cheek as her face moved close, blurring out of focus. Her lips were hot and soft, belying their look of coolness, fulfilling their promised invitation. A sudden ache filled his throat as he pulled away from her.

"You grieve nicely," she murmured.

He wanted to hit her.

"Don't bristle," she said. "It's so much more fun when you're relaxed." She lay back lazily in his arms. "Let's both relax. Let's forget everything tonight."

"What've you got to forget?"

"Enough." She drew her nails lightly across the sunken planes of his cheek. "What are you thinking?"

"About Cotton ——"

Her hand stopped short. "I thought we weren't ——"

"He said the world'll be a brighter place without Lenore Sorel, didn't he? Why did he say you knew it better than he?"

A perverse smile touched the corners of her mouth. "It doesn't mean anything much now. Maybe it's because I always want what I can't get." Her fingers slid across the bridge of his nose and marked an invisible mustache on his upper lip. "While Lenore was alive, I thought I wanted her brother. Now I'm not sure."

"What's that mean?"

"You know what it means. You knew it five seconds after you met me. It's one of those things you can't explain — they just happen."

"I mean about Sorel ——"

"Oh, that." She laughed softly. "Vic and I have been secretly engaged for the last three months. He didn't tell his sister because he didn't want any friction between us. They'd always been very close — so he dreaded the thought of having to tell her we were going to make the leap."

"Which you've made before?"

"Oh, yes. Horace cleaned up in Texas oil. We weren't exactly compatible — so I got this place and some cash and a few other odds and ends two years ago — and Horace went back to Texas." She frowned and shifted in his arms. "Why all the questions? Why so interested in all this?"

"You wouldn't be telling it to me if you thought I wasn't interested in it. Your ego isn't as big as Cotton's, but it exists. I'd say you've come a long way."

"Not as far as Vic and his sister, maybe — but far enough. From Scranton, Pennsylvania, to Beverly Hills — a good enough jump. In between I was a salesgirl and demonstrated cold creams at back doors and sang with a couple of cheap bands. But I learned to like nice things and look at pictures and use the right words at the right time. I never had time to let myself get neurotic."

"Like Lenore?"

"Like poor Lenore. Vic had to hire a private detective for her several months ago. She swore she was being followed on the street and being per-

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secuted on the 'phone. She said someone used to call her up and then just whistle the same phrase over and over until she hung up. Nothing came of it. The detective didn't see anybody all the time he was working on the case."

"I'd say she needed a psychiatrist instead of a detective."

"I thought so, too — but you didn't know Lenore . . ."

"Cotton wasn't the only one she tangled with, was he?"

"No — even Judd Mason ——" Then she slapped his cheek, lightly, in mock reproach. "So you finally brought the conversation around to him . . ."

"Isn't that why you invited me here?"

She sighed and turned in his arms to reach for her brandy glass. "You're so persistent — like heartburn . . ."

"What do you know about Mason?"

"Really very little," she said, sipping her drink. "I know you don't like him. I certainly don't like him. Lenore didn't like him."

"Then why does Sorel keep him on?"

"Lloyd Bradford hired him." She returned her drink to the table. "There's really no use asking me about Mason. I don't actually know a thing about him, and I don't care to know why you dislike him so much. I only said we might talk about him because I saw it was better bait than my beautiful white body to lure you out here." Slipping her hand under his coat, she deliberately dug her nails into his back. "I'll tell you something about Claude — and that's all. He's been quite thick with Mason recently. You might ask him some of your questions." She pulled his head down "Now pay some attention to me You've wasted so much damn time . . ."

Her tongue darted restlessly inside the hot, dark cavern behind her parted lips.

Then the telephone rang on the teakwood table at the end of the divan.

Its crystal-sharp shock sent his blood racing through him. But she seemed oblivious to the urgent sound. She ground her lips against his mouth, pulling him closer against her.

The bell still shrilled, insistent, peremptory, untiring.

"Let it ring," she murmured. "They'll hang up."

But it still rang.

"Damn . . ." Lying lazily back in his arms, she lifted the receiver from its pedestal. "Hello?" There was no change of expression on her face with her next words. "Why, darling!" Her lips silently shaped an explanation for him — *Vic* — and then she patted a little yawn into a tired sigh. "I'm afraid I dozed off on the divan . . . yes, it woke me up . . . no, sweet, of course not — I'm glad you called . . . earlier? . . . oh, that must've been while I went out for aspirin and a magazine, darling!"

All at once he knew he had been wrong to come. The terms of endearment she used so freely sickened him. He started to rise, but she caught his wrist in her free hand, shaking her head. Silently, firmly, he forced her fingers loose and eased himself off the divan. Her dress crept up the long sleek line of her legs with his movement. He looked down at the glasses on the table, at the black telephone base and two match books with her

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initials engraved on the two black covers.

"But, darling, it's so late," she said into the 'phone, shaking her head at him. "You really should try to rest now . . ."

She was still talking when he left the house.

CHAPTER NINE

THE morning was perfect. There was no industrial haze to obscure the view. A steady wind swept the sky clear of smoke and clouds. From the highest point of the labyrinthine roads overlooking the Sunset Strip, the gleaming towers of downtown Los Angeles dominated the sprawling city like the minarets of a movie-lot Bagdad floating magically in the sparkling golden air.

After rounding another short climbing curve, Curt halted the car and pressed the brake pedal to the floorboard. At last, after losing his way several times in the ascending maze of winding roads, he had found Claude Guthrie's home.

It was a modern house — a striking rectangular structure, with great slabs of limestone and panels of plate glass in lieu of conventional walls — set on the crown of the hill like a modern lighthouse. Its form had been determined by the terrain and the view. It seemed integrated organically with the hilltop.

A Filipino servant opened the buffed redwood door.

"Mr. Guthrie, please."

"Who is calling?"

"Prentice. Curt Prentice."

There was a sudden sound of voices behind the eggplant-shaped head. As the house boy turned, Curt saw Guthrie come into the austere entrance hall with Detective-Lieutenant Francis Hesbie.

The long-nosed detective turned to the resplendent figure in the exotic dressing gown and slippers. "Well, thanks for your help, Mr. Guthrie . . ."

"No trouble at all, sir. Good-by."

Hesbie touched the brim of his faded panama in a brief salute and went briskly down the steps.

"Come in, come in," said Guthrie.

Curt stepped inside. "Maybe I'm too early."

"Not at all, not at all. I'm just about to have breakfast. Perhaps you'll have some coffee with me — or breakfast, if you haven't eaten."

"I've eaten, thanks."

They went through the house and emerged into a little patio laid with Mexican tile, and hedged about by oleanders and blue plumbago and lath screens decorated with antique Chinese court scenes. The view of the city and the vast expanse of the valley was magnificent, unreal as a gigantic diorama. Giant transports hovered like silvered toys in the clear air above the valley as they took off and landed at the air terminal in Burbank.

Guthrie sat down at the table as the Filipino boy appeared with a covered tray. Curt waited while he drank tomato juice and then started on boiled eggs and toast.

"I imagine you're wondering why I'm here . . ."

Guthrie nodded. "The question has

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presented itself to me."

"It's about my sketch."

"Sketch?"

"The drawing you offered to buy the other day." Curt took coffee from the Filipino boy. "It was at the Sorel & Bradford opening. Neither of them knew where they'd picked it up. I'd done it several years ago and had lost track of it. You offered to buy it from me."

"Oh, yes — a girl's head . . ."

"Are you still interested in it?"

Guthrie pursed his full red lips. "Well, now — wherever art and artists are concerned . . ." He drank some coffee and blotted his mouth with a monogrammed napkin. "Have you brought it with you?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't." Thinking of the torn pieces he had let fall in the waste basket in his room. Curt regarded his glibness with emotionless detachment. "I stopped by only because I happened to be driving around in the neighborhood."

"How did you know where I lived?"

"Carol Mason had mentioned you lived up this way. I found myself exploring this section, remembered what she'd said and looked you up in the directory."

"A charming girl — Carol, that is — a lovely, sensible girl . . ." Guthrie pushed his plate from him. "How much are you asking for it?"

Curt shrugged. "I hadn't thought about that."

"Will thirty dollars be satisfactory?"

"Very much so."

"Sold!" Running a manicured hand through his wavy, dark hair, Guthrie sighed the sigh of a rescued man. "Now I must admit I feel somewhat better. The thought of your picture takes the bad taste out of my mouth. The local gestapo and I are hardly compatible."

"Have the police learned anything new?"

"Apparently not. This Hesbie person seems to be interrogating everyone who ever knew her. He spent half an hour asking me questions about last Tuesday morning."

"What's he doing?" Curt asked casually. "Testing alibis?"

Guthrie snapped open a chased silver case of long Russian cigarettes. "Not a very innocent word, is it? Alibis, I mean . . ." His full lips closed about the monogrammed cylinder he chose from the case. "Yes, I suppose that's his intention. He wanted to know my whereabouts the morning Lenore was murdered." He sighed. "As chance would have it, I wasn't home that morning. Ordinarily I work late — at least my conception of work — and then sleep rather late. Tuesday morning, though, I was up at the crack of dawn and dashing madly down to Union Station to meet a friend who was coming in from New York. I waited two hours and then called home to find a wire had come during my absence. My friend had been forced to postpone his trip at the last minute. I'm quite sure Hesbie will probe and dissect and analyze my narrative in very thorough fashion. Undoubtedly his policeman's mind sees me dashing madly between Union Station and Lenore's apartment and then calling home to establish my alibi."

"I should think Hesbie would have some sort of theory by now."

"If he hadn't when he arrived, I've provided his bulldog mind with a new postulate or two . . ." The dark plucked brows knitted in frowning concentration. "Perhaps he'll know how to in-

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terrogate Bradford a second time . . ."

Conscious of the pause that followed his words, Guthrie smiled with unexpected grimness and rose from the table. "Bradford is a complete fraud, thoroughly treacherous and artistically illiterate. I speak with unprecedented frankness, Prentice. I admit it. But how can one talk freely to a policeman or a servant? A stranger like yourself is always the perfect auditor." Controlling his anger, Guthrie smiled ruefully. "You may as well know the rest. Bradford was also in love with Lenore. Perhaps that explains my antipathy toward him. But from the first I've disliked him. I also dislike that shabby bravo he hired — Judd Mason . . . though Mason has been only too willing to snoop into his employer's background for me for a price. Thanks to Mason's ferretlike proclivities, I found out Bradford had been married before. He's still paying for the support of his wife and her child — but only because he's been forced to. He'd deserted them, you see . . ."

"Did Miss Sorel know he'd been married?"

"I'd let her know about it over the week-end. Lenore had very definite ideas about divorce — perhaps because of her Gallic influences . . ." For a moment Guthrie stood silent, lost in thought. Then he turned with a disarming smile. "But enough of that. While you're here, I'd like to show you a few of my treasures . . ."

It was obvious the interview as such was over. Curt accompanied him into the house to look at his collection. The paintings were apportioned to the various rooms with astute consideration for background. The best canvases were hung in the living room — a big room with a wide ceiling of terra-cotta color and white plaster walls balanced against tall picture windows — furnished with low sofas and chairs of cork construction.

A telephone rang somewhere in the house. Guthrie opened the buffed redwood door. The Filipino boy came into the hall.

"Miss Kendall, sir."

"All right, Carlos. I'll be right there."

Curt turned back to him in the doorway. "Thanks for your offer for the sketch. I'll call you about it."

"Do that. I'm glad you dropped by, Prentice. Good-by."

Curt frowned as he went down the steps in the warm sunlight. It had been a waste of time to make his call. He had learned as little from Guthrie as he had learned from Nedda Kendall. He touched the serpent tie clasp in his pocket — it was still the only link connecting Mason with Lenore Sorel. But if Guthrie's insinuations against Bradford's innocence had any basis in fact . . .

He shook his head. Mason had to be guilty. There could be no other alternative.

He went around his car and opened the door on the left side and then stopped short, his foot on the running board.

"Hiya," said Detective-Lieutenant Francis Hesbie. "Thought I'd like to talk to you, Prentice."

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CHAPTER TEN

CURT halted his forward movement into the car and looked past the steering wheel at the mild candle-gray eyes under the faded panama, the long white nose and small mouth above the jutting jaw.

"I drove my job around the curve," explained Hesbie. "Then I decided maybe I'd like to talk to you. Pull up your butt and relax."

Curt eased himself behind the wheel and closed the door. Beyond the windshield the mesquite and manzanita clinging to the hillside shivered under the rumpling fingers of the wind. He took out his cigarettes slowly, stalling for time.

"Why'd you come here this morning, Prentice?"

"I offered to sell Guthrie a sketch of mine. He said he was interested in it a couple of days ago."

"That so?" The quiet-mannered detective shook his head, refusing the offer of a cigarette. "He buy it?"

"Yes."

Hesbie tapped blunt fingertips on the dashboard. "How you like your new job?"

"At Lawlor's arcade?"

"That's it."

"It's a stopgap," Curt said, taking in smoke. "Why the sudden consideration about my livelihood?"

"You don't have to take that tone with me, Prentice. You're in the clear — both you and Sorel."

"Then why the questions?"

"You still happen to be a witness — even if you didn't notify me about your new address ——"

"I'm staying at the ——"

"— Pilgrim Hotel on Highland," Hesbie finished for him. "Sorel told me."

"That still doesn't explain all the questions."

The thin, soft-voiced man pulled at his nose with thumb and forefinger. "Frankly, Prentice. this case refuses to jell for us. I'd like to get some help from you."

"What about Simon Cotton? Haven't you picked him up yet?"

"Not yet. Anyhow, I'm not sure he's the boy we want."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. A hunch, maybe."

"You have any ideas about anybody else?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. You walked into this thing blind like us, but you got there ahead of us, and you know more of the people involved than we do."

"I doubt that."

"You think Nedda Kendall ever takes me out riding?"

Curt turned sharply. "How'd you know about that?"

"She was seen picking you up last night."

Resentment flared up in him. "Have you got somebody following me?"

"Take it easy, son," the older man said mildly. "It happened to be pure coincidence. One of my boys saw her park outside Lawlor's place and then drive off with you at midnight. He was on his way home from a show with his wife at the time."

His irritation slowly receded. "What about it? Why shouldn't I be seen with her?"

"You go home with her?"

His anger returned, prompted by the

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realization that he was reddening without cause. "I did."

"Yeah?"

"We talked about her painting."

"You did, huh?"

"Yes." He knew he sounded like a fool. "That's all there is to say about her."

Hesbie tapped on the dashboard. "Well, let's take Carol Mason and her old man. You stayed with them the first night you blew into town."

"I don't know anything about them."

"And then you drove the Craig girl to the bus terminal."

"What of it?"

"Nothing much. We know she caught her bus on time and then went ahead and got herself drowned some sixteen or eighteen hours later. She doesn't enter into the picture at all now. But these other people — they all talk to you . . . you and don't go around like a bunch of mutes."

Curt tasted smoke again. "What do you expect me to tell you?"

"Anything at all that'll help us find out who killed Lenore Sorel."

He let his face go blank. The silver tie clasp in his pocket felt hard and smooth under his fingers. He watched the mesquite and manzanita trembling on the hillside.

"I'll tell you one or two things I ought to keep under my hat," said Hesbie. "They might jog your memory for you. I don't know how much Guthrie told you about me ——"

"He said you wanted to know where he was the morning Lenore Sorel was murdered."

"He's not the only one. It could be that some stranger knocked her off, but until we find some evidence that points that way I'm concentrating on the people connected with the gallery. She didn't know anybody outside that circle. Her brother, you and Carol Mason are out. But Bradford, Judd Mason, and the Kendall dame, as well as Guthrie, are all possibilities."

Hesbie pushed his faded panama back from his forehead, revealing his salt-and-pepper pompadour. "We've checked all their stories. All of 'em contain holes as big as atom bomb craters. Which is nothing unusual. Few of us have witnesses who can account for every minute of our time."

Curt feigned hesitation. "There's something I thought of. Nedda Kendall mentioned it." He looked up. "We did a little talking about the case."

"I figured you might," Hesbie said drily. "What was it?"

"Well, it seems Lenore Sorel had a kind of persecution complex. It reached the point where her brother hired a private detective to prove to her that nobody was trying to hound her."

"Sorel's already told me about that." Hesbie inclined his head sidewise, barely perceptibly, seeing how he was taking the news. "I checked with the agency. They worked for two weeks and didn't uncover a thing. That was a month ago. She didn't complain after that. It was all in her mind." The panama brim came down, shading the quizzical gray eyes. "I guess she had her reasons for her complexes, though. Some women take widowhood pretty hard."

"Widow?" Curt didn't try to conceal his interest. "You mean she'd been married?"

"Back in France. Her husband's name was André Morel. He was killed in an air raid in 1941. That was before she and her brother came back to this

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country."

"Do you think it has any bearing on the case?"

"None that I can think of. It helps to explain her persecution complex, but it's got nothing to do with why she was bumped off. As I get it, she had a tongue that cut like a black-snake whip. I guess practically everybody she knew felt like rubbing her out at one time or another."

Curt sat still, savoring the irony of it. Fay and Alec had never hurt anyone in their brief span of life. By comparison Lenore Sorel had deserved to die. Yet it would be for her murder that Mason would eventually face punishment. It was the way it had to end. He had to make the outcome shape up that way and that way alone.

The long-nosed detective rubbed his jutting chin. "You haven't seen any Luger automatics while you've been out here, have you, Prentice?"

Instantly he was alert, thinking of his own missing revolver. "Why do you ask?"

"We figure a Luger was used to do the job. They're not too uncommon, as guns go. You've been overseas, so you ought to recognize one if you saw it."

"I know what they look like."

"Have you seen any?"

"In the Mason house, you mean?"

"Could be. Or up above, or at Nedda Kendall's place."

Curt shook his head. "I haven't seen a gun since I've been out here."

"You have any idea who sapped you over the head out in Glendale?"

The bland query caught him off-guard. "How'd you know about that?"

"Carol Mason told me. I understand you had some cash taken from your wallet."

"That's right," he said tersely.

"Nothing else?"

"That was all."

"Why didn't you report it to the police?"

"We discussed it that night and decided not to do anything at the time. The next morning Lenore Sorel was murdered, and it went right out of my head. It wasn't the first time I've lost a few bucks. I didn't let myself get excited about it."

The mild tallow-gray eyes surveyed him in silence for several moments. Then the thin man sighed and opened the door to the right of him. His long trunk and short legs produced the curious effect of foreshortening when he stepped down to the road. He held the door open, leaning against its edge.

"Thanks for the chat, Prentice. Get in touch with me if you hear anything."

"I'll call you."

"Where?"

"Police Headquarters?"

"Central Homicide," said Hesbie. "So long."

Curt started the car and headed toward Hollywood.

He stopped outside the first drug store he saw and went inside and looked up Lloyd Bradford's address in the Los Angeles directory. Bradford lived in an apartment house on Argyle Avenue.

The apartment building on Argyle looked as if it had been designed by a confectioner rather than an architect. Its white buttresses and topheavy cornices were better suited to a wedding cake. The entrance foyer was decorated in the usual movie house tradition.

He crossed the carpeted lobby to the desk.

"Mr. Bradford, please."

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The middle-aged woman at the switchboard touched the hennaed nest of her hair with painted nails like peeling talons. "He just this minute left here."

"I see."

"Do you care to leave a message?"

"No, thank you. No message."

"The other party who was just here ——"

But he was already across the foyer, walking briskly out to the broiling sidewalk. His car was parked halfway down the block. As he unlocked it, two cars went past him in rapid succession, both loud with whining protest, moving too quickly in second gear. A delayed reaction to the words in the lobby — *"The other party who was just here"* — prompted him to lift his head and look after it.

The second car was the dirty brown sedan, its rear license plate obscured by a coating of mud, its driver merely huddled shapelessness from the back. Directly ahead of it was one of the Mason coupés — he was certain of it . . . though the car was already too far away for him to identify the driver. He wondered who it was — Carol or her father — and why the call had been made on Bradford.

For a moment he thought of returning to the lobby and asking the woman at the switchboard if the other party had been male or female. Then he changed his mind and stooped to enter the car. Whether Mason or his daughter had made the call — if there had been a call . . . it was immaterial to him. He needed evidence as tangible as the tie clasp in his pocket; anything else would only prolong his game of blind man's buff.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The gallery was bathed in the near-ecclesiastical quiet. An immaculate silence, Curt thought, watching Carol Mason advancing silently toward him. She walked slowly, almost solemnly, no longer reminding him of Fay. She wore a simple beige frock which blended subtly with the gleaming pine walls. It occurred to him that all her ensembles were chosen to harmonize with her background. He wondered if the decision had been her own or if Sorel had been responsible for it.

"Hello," she said. "Mr. Sorel's back in his office."

"I didn't come in to talk to him."

"Oh?"

"Is Lloyd Bradford here?"

"Not yet. I imagine he'll be in a little later on, Mr. Prentice."

He hesitated, restless, indecisive, at once thankful he didn't have to lie to Bradford and irritated because he had let himself in for another fruitless errand. Then he heard the murmur of voices behind her. The panelled door in the rear wall swung open. He watched Nedda Kendall come out of the office, followed by Victor Sorel.

The blonde girl, in a suit of pale fuchsia, wore her light burnished hair in braided strands, coiled about her head like pliant bamboo reeds. The telephone rang inside the office. They watched Sorel turn back to the sound, slight and dapper in his dark suit. Nedda Kendall saw them standing together at the front of the gallery and

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came toward them with indolent grace.

"Hello, there," she murmured lazily.

Curt nodded. "Hello."

"Another busman's holiday?"

To his chagrin her mocking tone disconcerted him, as though her raillery disclosed more plainly than overt coyness their near-intimacy of the night before. But he was saved from making a reply. The door opened at the far end of the room, and they turned to watch Victor Sorel coming toward them.

"Good afternoon. Prentice!" His pale, suave features were faintly animated. "Well, it's been found at last . . ." He smiled briefly at their inquiring faces. "My car, I mean. The police just called. They've found it."

"Wonderful!" said Nedda Kendall.

"Where did they find it, Mr. Sorel?"

His slender hands gestured expressively. "Down on Central Avenue, Carol. The keys were still in the ignition, but apparently it hasn't been harmed. I can pick it up whenever I wish."

"Why don't we do it now, darling?"

The telephone rang in the rear office.

Carol Mason said, moving quickly away from them, "Excuse me——"

In the pause that followed her withdrawal. Curt murmured. "Well, I'd better be on my way——"

"Did you want to see me, Prentice?"

"No, I didn't. I thought Bradford might be here."

"He should be here any minute now," said Sorel. "Why don't you wait?" Then he turned as the office door opened. "Yes, Carol?"

"Telephone, Mr. Sorel. It's Mr. Bradford."

"Very well."

Watching him walk with brisk elegance down the long room, Curt became uncomfortably conscious of Nedda Kendall's closeness. The door closed. He stood silent. The blonde girl sighed and sat down on a pale yellow leather divan, crossing her tapering legs.

"Cigarette, please."

Silently Curt took out cigarettes. She waited for him to light the white cylinder between her lips, but his lighter failed to work. She opened her purse and handed him a book of matches. It was the kind he had seen in her South Seas room — the cover bore her monogrammed initials. He kept his hand deliberately steady as he touched the match flame to her cigarette. Amusement lurked behind her cool blue eyes.

"Why didn't you stay last night?"

"I decided it was my curfew time."

"Are you so allergic to telephones?"

"Off and on."

She blew a wobbling circle of smoke, like a vague planetary ring. "Isn't it a rather drab ailment?"

"But occasionally useful," he said.

"I still want to talk to you."

"About what?"

She shook her head, smiling. "Must you be so difficult?" Her stockings whispered in rustling friction as she uncrossed her legs. "Come to the house tonight."

He shook his head.

"I'll pick you up."

"I've something else on tonight."

"Get out of it."

"You're engaged," he said. "You're going to marry Sorel . . . or aren't you?"

An odd look disturbed the poised loveliness of her face, like a ripple abruptly ruffling the mirrored surface of a pool. Then the office door opened. Her inner censor immediately restored control to the nerves and muscles beneath the flawless skin.

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Victor Sorel came toward them, with Carol Mason just behind him. "That was Lloyd. He's going to be a little late."

"Oh, will you have to wait for him, darling?"

The blonde girl looked at the heart-shaped watch pinned to her sleeve and slipped her hand through his arm. "If we leave now, we can have lunch before the vultures gather ——"

"Very well." Patting her hand, Sorel nodded at Curt. "Good-by, Prentice. I told Lloyd you were here. I doubt if he'll be too late."

"Thanks."

"I'll be back by two-thirty or three, Carol."

"All right, Mr. Sorel. I'm glad your car's been found."

"Yes, indeed. I've been lost without it."

In another ten seconds, as the glass door opened and closed, Curt felt a new silence enter the gallery. It was the silence of constraint — the synthetic quiet generated by embarrassment or the repression of anger or fear. He looked at the crisp brown curls below his shoulders, studying the hazel eyes, the undefended mouth — and wondered why Carol Mason was suddenly afraid to be alone with him. There had been no hint of it before the door closed. But now something was abruptly troubling her, as though she had something to hide from him he could not tell what.

The realization moved him to make an unpremeditated remark. "What are you doing tonight?"

Although her face remained unchanged, he knew her fear was suddenly tinctured with puzzlement.

"Doing?" she echoed.

"I'd like to take you out."

She hesitated. "When?"

"Fairly late. After I finish work at twelve." When she still hesitated, he said. "There's a swing spot I've noticed on Vine Street. We could have a drink and a sandwich, and talk. Nothing fancy, you can see. I'd simply like to talk to you."

Two little lines of reluctant indecision appeared between her brows. "Well, I don't know . . ."

"Do you have to ask your father's permission?"

"Of course not," she said promptly. "Where will I meet you?"

"I can come home for you?"

"No, don't. I'll stay down and see a movie. I'll meet you outside the arcade."

"Good," he said. "At midnight." Starting toward the door, he turned back to her. "Incidentally, you might tell Bradford I couldn't wait." An unaccountable impulse prompted his parting words. "He knows where he can find me."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Light blazed in dazzling brilliance through the arcade, glittering and tawdry as spangles and sequins, like a visual reflection of the thumping and blaring of the juke boxes. The rifles cracked steadily at the shooting gallery. The murmur of voices and laughter rose above the slow moving crush of bodies like a garrulous shadow. It was the busiest night Curt had spent at

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the place. He had already sketched two sailors and their girls when Lloyd Bradford appeared shortly after nine o'clock. The picture dealer cut an incongruous figure in the noisy atmosphere. He looked big and shambling, like a well-dressed mastiff, and yet, despite his awkwardness, his expensive tailoring proclaimed the fact that he was slumming.

"Hello, Prentice."

Curt nodded, busy with his collection of chalks.

"Where can we talk?"

"About what?"

"You ought to know that. You were looking for me at the gallery this afternoon."

"Oh, that." Curt looked up from rearranging his chalks. "That didn't mean anything. It isn't important now."

"Why was it so important this afternoon?"

"What makes you think it was?"

"If it wasn't, why did you stop at my apartment house and ask for me?"

Curt pinned a fresh sheet of paper to his board. "How'd you know that?"

"The manageress gave me your description."

"Maybe it wasn't me she described. Maybe it was Judd Mason."

A sudden hesitancy broke the rhythmic give-and-take of words between them.

"Mason, too," Bradford said slowly. "She knows him. He came by just before you did."

Curt drew a chalk line across his board and then erased it. He had learned what he wanted to know, and yet it gave him little satisfaction. His curiosity was appeased — no more than that . . . except for an intangible feeling of relief that defied analysis. Somewhere deep in his mind flickered a sense of thankfulness that it had been the father rather than the daughter who had preceded him at the apartment hotel on Argyle.

"We can't talk under these conditions, Prentice. Come outside."

"I can't leave the booth. I've got a job to do. We can get together some other time."

"Why do you think I came here? I want to talk to you now!"

Curt shrugged. "Then go ahead."

"What did Guthrie have to say to you?"

"Nothing important: I simply got the impression you aren't too friendly with him."

"I'm not." The dealer passed an impatient hand over his close-cropped hair. "What did he tell you? Did he say anything about Lenore Sorel?"

"Hesbie told me something about her."

The wide mouth tightened. "What?"

"He said she'd been married before she came back to this country. It seems her husband was killed in an air raid before she —"

"I know that," Bradford interrupted shortly. "She told me just before she ——" He halted and then went on, mumbling his last words — "before she died." His hand brushed over his hair again. "What about Guthrie? Are you sure he didn't say anything about me?"

"Nothing much."

"I know him better than that! What did he say about Lenore?"

"Well, he was in love with her ——"

"So he says," Bradford muttered contemptuously. "If it hadn't been for me ——". The light blue eyes watched him with sardonic disbelief. "That's all he said?"

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"He mentioned you'd been married before."

"Married and divorced — as he told Lenore. That's why she ——"

Curt waited a moment. "What?"

"Never mind," Bradford mumbled. "Is that all he told you?"

Curt barely heard him, suddenly fighting to keep his hand from shaking. Judd Mason had entered the arcade. His wiry figure stopped on the threshold the instant he saw the two of them. Bradford, facing Curt, was unaware of his entrance. The hunchbacked attendant at the shooting concession reached for a rifle, but Mason abruptly turned on his heel and went back to the street, lost in the passing throng on the sidewalk.

"Is that all he told you?" Bradford repeated irritably.

Curt had to force his attention back to him. "That's all."

"How about Hesbie? Didn't he tell you anything else?"

"He talked a little about alibis."

Bradford snorted. "The police and their alibis! If they devoted as much time to looking for Cotton as they waste on people like Mason and myself ——"

"Why are you so sure Cotton's guilty?"

Unexpectedly guile crossed the open face, momentarily altering the wide mouth and big nose, the ingenuous indentation in the square chin. "I have my reasons . . ." The words seemed uttered without thinking, as if taken from the context of an unheard interior monologue. Almost instantly, the other recovered control. "Well, never mind . . ." He turned away. "Thanks for your trouble, Prentice. Good night."

Turning from the booth, his face white and immobile, Bradford walked quickly toward the exit. Strolling couples moved unconcernedly across his path, forcing him to halt and change his course several times. His irritation revealed itself in the dull red rising slowly above the back of his collar. Then he was gone.

Standing up, Curt inhaled deeply and stretched. A seventh inning stretch, he thought, suddenly uneasy. If Bradford was withholding evidence from the police and seeking personal revenge, it made their lines of action disquietingly similar. Only the quarry was different — Cotton rather than Mason . . .

As he swung away from the booth, a sudden movement in the crush of customers caught his attention. Someone had stepped hastily behind an out-of-order peep show machine at the end of the aisle. It was a furtive movement, suspicious enough to cause him to look down at the floor. The open space below the shoulder-high cabinet revealed unpressed blue serge trouser legs. The sight resolved all his frustration and irritation into a single bomb burst of anger. He moved swiftly down the aisle to the machine and then stopped short, looking contemptuously at the furtive-faced little man who backed away from him in the corner.

"Hello, Brown Sedan," he said softly. "Or should I call you Mel Gitzer?"

The little man remained silent, crouching slightly, helpless and at bay in the narrow space formed by the cabinet, the back wall and the adjoining jog in the wall. He was unkempt, unclean, shabby-suited, with the look of the poverty-stricken drinker about him. His bloodshot dark eyes moved nervously on either side of the prominent ridge of his knife-handle nose. His hands fumbled ineffectually at his

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sides. He looked as if he wished he were back in Chicago, in the North Clark Street office of the American Investigation Service.

"Why so shy, Gitzer? Why didn't you introduce yourself to me before now?"

"You got nothin' on me," the other protested in a harsh, hollow voice. "You can't prove nothin' ——"

Stepping forward suddenly, Curt brought his right heel down hard on the other's right foot. Gitzer gasped with pain. Beyond the narrow cul-de-sac the blurred clamor of the arcade rattled in senseless ferment. To incurious passersby they seemed engaged in friendly conversation.

"Start talking," Curt said coldly. "Who's paying you? Who put you on me?"

"Nobody. Nobody at all."

"Why bother to lie about it?"

"I'm not lying!"

"Who hired you?"

"I told you already ——" He winced as Curt brought his heel down again. "God's honest truth! Nobody's in on it!"

"You mean it's your own brilliant idea?"

"I decided to leave the agency. Personal reasons, y'unnerstand." His hand went to his mouth to cover a cough. "Bigger opportunities out here on the coast."

"For what?" Curt asked. "Blackmail?" The moment he uttered the word he was certain of it. "Things probably got too hot for you at the agency, didn't they? You'd chiseled and connived once too often. So then you decided to stick to me and see what I'd do. You've been waiting for me to kill Mason, and then you intend to step up and offer to keep quiet for a price."

"You can't prove ——"

"Am I right, Gitzer? Is that why you're here?"

The bloodshot eyes looked down, apprehensively watching the moving foot. "Lissen, Pren ——" His head came up quickly as the foot left the floor. "Yeh! Yeh, you're right!"

"Nobody hired you?"

"Nobody! 'S'truth, Prentice!"

Sincerity veined his words with the urgency of fear. There was no further need to doubt him. He had committed an understandable blunder. His cunning had mistaken his client's original unquestioning expenditure of money for an unlimited supply of funds.

Curt stepped aside. "Get out of here."

Gitzer remained crouched in the corner, suspiciously, wary-eyed.

"Get out," Curt said. "If I see that car of yours again — if I find you following me . . ."

The stooped-shouldered little man scuttled past him in a crablike rush, face and shoulders turned away in fearful anticipation of a passing blow. Curt watched him dart through the crowd and disappear in the press of strollers on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE wavering smoke columns of countless cigarettes were knitted together in an impalpable gray abrasive that scraped their eyes when they entered the bar. Their ears were assaulted with piercing stridence by the sweating in-

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strumental group huddled on the small lighted dais at the midway mark behind the long bar. The bar was crowded, lined two and three deep near the band.

"Shall we wait?"

Carol Mason thrust her hands deep in the slashed pockets of her yellow cardigan box coat. "If you like——"

Miraculously a waiter appeared and crooked his finger and then guided them through the crush to a rear booth.

"What'll you have?" Curt asked.

She was wearing her beige frock under her coat. "Oh, anything."

"I haven't eaten since two o'clock," he said. "I'm having a club sandwich and a scotch and soda."

"I'll have a sandwich, too, and coffee."

Their waiter disappeared. Once again her nearness was beginning to disconcert him. His reactions to her presence were unpredictable. First she reminded him of Fay — then he saw no resemblance. At the moment the similarity was strikingly vivid. She faced his scrutiny gravely, unsmiling.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Wrong?"

"You don't look particularly happy."

"I'm wondering why you wanted to see me tonight."

"You sound as if I need to have an ulterior motive to date you."

She didn't answer.

"It might've occurred to you that I'm a stranger in town. You might've assumed I like talking to you."

He welcomed the reappearance of their waiter. The interruption served to fill a sudden awkward gap between them.

She said, "Mr. Sorel's paid for Janet Craig's funeral expenses."

"Oh?"

"Her body was sent home to her family for burial yesterday."

"She didn't have much of a life, did she?"

"No, she was always quite lonely."

"No boy friends?"

She was suddenly interested in her plate. "No."

"Why were you so upset by her drowning?"

She said. "Nothing that means anything now," and then shivered. "The things I'm afraid of . . ."

"Name three."

"No, thank you." She shook her head. "There are certain things you don't talk about. After all, there has to be a certain core of privacy inside you. Without it, the individual doesn't exist."

He decided not to push her. "How about Simon Cotton? Have the police found him yet?"

"I don't think so. At least the police hadn't called Mr. Sorel by the time I left this afternoon." She sliced through her sandwich and put her knife on her plate. "They're probably wasting their time, anyway . . ."

Instantly he was alert to the implied suspicion behind her murmured words.

"You mean you think Cotton didn't kill Lenore Sorel?" he asked carelessly.

His question put her on guard. "It doesn't matter what I think."

"The police mightn't agree with you."

"I've already told them all I know," she said. "I'm not sure I can say as much for other people."

Without warning her voice was cold, almost prim, on the verge of being hostile. It occurred to him that her original dubiety about his motives was still in effect. He had to gloss over the sudden

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awkwardness and seek his goal by a circuitous route.

"I told Hesbie everything he wanted to know," he said. "I'm from Chicago, still under thirty, a postwar California tourist. If I like it, as I told Hesbie, I'll stay. If I don't, I can go somewhere else."

"Back to Chicago?"

"Maybe." The moment of doubt was past — it seemed safe enough to start out on the new route. "How about you? Are you a native?"

"As Californians go," she said. "I've been here twelve years."

"Where did you live before that?"

"Chicago, too." She smiled. "It all seems so long ago by now. Sometimes I think my memory refuses to recall anything before the time my mother first brought me out here ——" She stopped and shifted the fork beside her plate and then looked at him with grave eyes. "You see, my parents separated while I was still young. I didn't see my father again until last year — after my mother had died. She worked until she fell ill — and then it was all over so quickly . . . it took me a little time to make the necessary adjustment . . ."

"So then your father showed up?"

"Yes, I — I couldn't very well tell him . . . I mean — well, he was my father — and somehow my mother had always regretted their estrangement . . ."

Suddenly her lame words gave him new encouragement. It was obvious the relationship between father and daughter was tenuous and artificial, enforced in all likelihood by Mason's roughshod manner rather than by any sense of filial duty on her part. There was no need for him to consider her feelings, he realized.

He fingered the silver tie clasp in his pocket.

"So we're all ex-Chicagoans . . ."

"Yes."

"I suppose I should've guessed it when I saw my sketch on your desk Monday afternoon," he said carelessly.

His shot was elaborately casual, but it failed to hit its mark. The ingenuous, undefended face betrayed no reaction. Then he wondered if he had actually missed his target. There had seemed to be a flicker of emotion in her eyes; the lids dropped, as if in concealment. Once again he sensed the presence of secrets behind her face — things troubling her . . . creating fear and confusion. He wondered if the drawing could be one of them.

Yet when she spoke again she seemed unaware of the implications of his remark. "I wonder who it was prowling around the house Monday night?"

"I don't know." He chewed his sandwich. "Does your father have any ideas?"

"None that I know of. He has no enemies of any kind out here, so I'm sure you weren't attacked for him by mistake. He thought it was just a prowler . . ."

"A sneak thief?"

"Yes." She looked at him over her coffee cup. "I'm sorry about your wallet being stolen. The money from it, I mean. If my father had been awake . . . well, he has a revolver . . ."

"It might've helped."

"As a matter of fact, he has two of them now. I meant to ask him where he bought the new one."

Sudden hopeful interest darted through him. "What kind?"

"I really don't know. I can't tell one gun from another. But I noticed he

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brought it down to the gallery this morning and put it in his locker."

Instantly his mind was alert, questioning, aggressive. All his original suspicions about being knocked out and robbed flooded back to him. It was Mason who had been responsible — Mason had done it. But he had to get his hands on the revolver in Mason's locker before he could prove it.

If it actually turned out to be his Luger — and if ballistics tests proved that the bullet taken from Lenore Sorel was . . .

"What are you thinking about?" she asked.

He said, bluntly, deliberately brusque, "You."

The single word was an intuitive improvisation. It worked — his tone seemed to startle her. He decided to follow up his advantage before she could take refuge behind icy skepticism.

"You're not a very good liar, are you?"

She tensed, involuntarily, revealingly. "What do you mean?"

"Two things," he said. "First of all, there's your attitude about Lenore Sorel. You say it doesn't matter what you think about her murder. That's lie number one. You have your own ideas about what's happened, and they don't let you sleep nights." He watched her face. The hazel eyes seemed tawny and flecked with gold. His own eyes traced the defenceless, gentle line of her mouth. "Lie number two concerns Janet Craig. You were in a state of panic when you first told me she'd drowned — Wednesday night . . . when you were looking for your father. Since then you've tried to tell me it really doesn't matter to you. Maybe you don't think so, but it all adds up to some pretty inept lying."

For a moment she looked at him blankly across the narrow table, oblivious to the uproar of the bar all around them, as if listening to a faraway echo of his words. Her face was white, the skin seemingly drawn taut over the bone structure. Then, to his surprise, tears shone in her eyes. Her face seemed to collapse in a sudden abandonment of all pretense at stoicism. She dropped her head to her hands, crying bitterly behind the protection of her latticed fingers.

At last he said, "I'm sorry . . ."

She lifted her head, looking at him with anguished eyes. "You're right. I have to tell someone about Janet Craig." Her voice thinned then to a husky whisper.

"You see, I — I killed her."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For a moment her whispered confession was more devastating to him than her unexpected introduction of her father in the deserted art gallery. Her words then had been innocent enough — their significance had been meaningful only to him. Her face then had been guileless and friendly. But now her eyes were unguarded and agonized, like open wounds in her white face. He listened to a girl laugh somewhere near them, as if in ironic mockery of her naked misery, and then he slowly shook his head.

"You couldn't have done it," he said. "It was impossible for you ——"

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"Oh, not actually," she said quickly. "I didn't mean it that way."

He sat back, relaxing. "That's better."

"But I'm directly responsible for her death. I told her, when she left on her vacation, not to come back to my house."

"So that was it," he murmured, recalling the coolness between them. "Why?"

"It's something I—I feel so ashamed about. Janet and—and my father . . . it wasn't that I would've been so shocked or would've objected—so cheap, so furtive . . ."

The revelation was a complete surprise. Janet Craig had been Judd Mason's mistress. The relationship seemed oddly sordid—the unhappy, friendless girl . . . the man whose experience with women could have given him no attitude but contempt toward them.

"I found out just last week," the brown-haired girl said quietly, self-accusingly. "I had an unforgivable scene with her. Everything I said to her I—I should've said to my father. I've regretted it ever since. When I—I found out she was dead, I knew she'd killed herself. She'd committed suicide, and I was to blame."

"You don't know that's so," he said. "It could've been accidental."

She shook her head. "It wasn't any accident. It was all my fault."

Suddenly he felt impatient with her. She had added another touch to her father's portrait, but her disclosure was worthless for his purposes. Mel Gitzer and the others who worked for the American Investigation Service in Chicago had discovered what little he needed to know about Mason as an individual. What was important were the steps leading up to the murder he was certain Mason had committed. If she knew her father had been involved with Lenore Sorel—if he could learn that much from her . . .

"Forget Janet Craig," he said. "You don't know she killed herself, so you can't blame yourself for it."

"It couldn't have been an accident——"

"How about Simon Cotton?" He deliberately interrupted her. "Why don't you think he killed Lenore Sorel?"

"I didn't say that!" Instantly her tearful self-recrimination had changed to anger. "I don't know why you insist——"

"You've got definite ideas about the case," he said. "I don't know why you try to deny it. Or is that part of your core of privacy?"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"Bradford thinks Cotton did it, but Guthrie seems to think Bradford's mixed up in it. Maybe you don't agree with either one."

"Maybe I don't!"

He watched her, guaging the depth and sincerity of her anger. "When I talked to Hesbie, he indicated everybody connected with the gallery except you and Sorel was under suspicion. That included Guthrie—Bradford—your father——"

"And Nedda Kendall?" she added crisply, less questioningly than challengingly.

"Her, too," he said, slowly. "Maybe you think——"

"I've already told you—it doesn't matter what I think!" Swiftly, before he could react in time to stop her, she rose and slipped out of the booth.

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"Good night, Mr. Prentice!"

Her abrupt departure caught him off-guard. For a moment he thought of hurrying after her through the thinning crowd, but then he shrugged resignedly, and beckoned to their waiter, and paid the check. He had learned that Mason had conducted a furtive affair with Janet Craig and that his daughter suspected Nedda Kendall, but only one thing suddenly mattered to him. He had to find out what kind of revolver Mason had put in his clothes locker at the art gallery.

Turning on his heel to start toward Sunset, he halted abruptly. He was being a fool. He couldn't hope to break into the place. He was certain to be caught if he were stupid enough to try it.

As he stood irresolute under the striped canopy, headlights cut a sweeping white swath across the dark intersection marked by the winking amber lights of the traffic signals set at caution. Glancing up at the sudden glare, he recognized the car. It was Carol Mason's coupé. He moved instinctively from the sidewalk into the street, walking directly into the path of the moving car. Brakes squealed; tires skidded on the pavement. He walked around the car and opened the door.

"What on earth are you trying to——" Her voice shook with shock and anger. "If I'd hit you!"

"You didn't" he said. "There's something I had to say to you."

"I doubt it."

"I just happened to remember I left my lighter at the gallery this morning."

Her mouth opened with outraged incredulity. "Do you mean to say that's why you——"

"I don't want to bother you by coming back to the gallery again. I thought if we could stop by for it now and wipe the slate clean between us——"

"At this time of night?"

"Would we set off any alarm system?"

"Of course not," she said. "I can get in without any trouble." She looked at him, abruptly wary. "But I don't see why——"

"Because I know you don't want to see me again. You won't have to meet me when others are around."

He wondered if his glib answer sounded at all convincing.

"All right," she said. "I'll drive you over there."

There was little traffic as they drove the brief distance to the gallery. He looked back several times. No one seemed to be following them.

"I don't know if we could park outside," she said. "It may look suspicious to anyone passing by."

"Why not park around the corner and then walk back?"

"Yes. I suppose that's the best thing to do."

They passed the darkened gallery and then turned off on the first side street. She parked and locked the car and then walked silently beside him. Cars passed them on the boulevard with purring swiftness. She opened her purse for her key and unlocked the plate-glass door. The immaculate darkness confronted them like a motionless curtain.

"Step to the left," she said. "There's an electric-eye connection that's broken when you step straight across the threshold. It's part of the alarm system. We've agreed to go in and out this way whenever any of us have to work late at night. Step three paces to

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the left and then follow me along the left wall."

He obeyed her instructions, walking slowly behind her in the hushed darkness. His eyes made gradual adjustment to the gloom. A single fluorescent light glowed at half strength at the end of the room. Under its anemic illumination the paintings on the wall seemed like empty frames.

"Shall I turn on some more lights?"

"It may not be necessary. I remember where I was sitting. I'd lit a cigarette for Nedda Kendall."

Her silence was several degrees cooler than any reply could have been.

He moved cautiously to the furniture grouping where he had talked to Nedda Kendall and made a pretense of fumbling between the cushions.

"Is it there?" she asked. "Shall I turn on the lights?"

"I don't think you'll——" He feigned sudden discovery. "Here it is. I was sure I'd left it here."

"Well, that was simple . . ." she began.

He cut her short. "One other thing——"

"Yes?"

"That revolver you mentioned——"

"My father's, you mean?"

"I can tell you what make it is if you'll show it to me."

Again her voice went cold with suspicion. "I think we'd better go."

"I'd like to see that revolver," he said. "I have my reasons for wanting to see it."

"So that's why you tricked me into bringing you here!"

"That's unimportant. I want to see that revolver."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"That won't do you any good," he said. "Now I'm here I'm going to look at it."

He waited until she moved. Then she crossed the room into the second office and opened an unlocked door. She opened the second locker from the left and reached up to the top shelf for a small wooden box.

"Here you are."

His hands threatened to shake as he took the box from her. He felt as if he had run a great distance; his heart thudded erratically inside his chest. The flashlight remained focused on his hands. He opened the lid.

"What kind is it?"

He looked down at the Luger which had been stolen from him.

"What kind——" Her flashlight shone in his face when he failed to answer her. "Why are you looking at it like that?"

"Because it's mine."

Her voice came out in a whisper. "Yours?"

"First my sketch and now my revolver," he said. "Odd how my belongings wind up in this place, isn't it?"

"But my father——"

"He owns it, you mean? He doesn't actually — unless he believes in finders being keepers. He took it from me Monday night — when I was knocked out outside your house."

"But — but that means——"

"He knocked me out?" He let the pause linger between them. "That's right."

He stood still, the opened wooden box in his hands, waiting for her reply. But the next words came from a source beyond her.

"That's exactly right," said Judd Mason. "And maybe I'll do it again."

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

As CURT turned sharply toward the doorway, the light switch clicked with the finality of a closing door. Glaring, white light flooded the room from the naked bulb in the ceiling above them. Judd Mason stood on the threshold, his face limned in stark detail by the unsparing light, his predatory dark eyes watching them with foxlike alertness. He wore a knitted brown jersey under his brown coat. He was hatless. The molded bony contours of his face seemed more pronounced than usual under the harsh light.

"Put the box back," he ordered in his rasping, metallic voice.

Curt looked at him, weighing the chances of snatching up the Luger from the shallow container. "I don't think so——"

"I do." A Colt .38 automatic appeared in his hand in a swift, practiced movement. "Put it back where you found it, Prentice."

Slowly Curt started to obey and then changed his mind.

"It's mine," he said. "I keep it."

"Put it on the floor. I'll tell you if you get to keep it." The automatic moved threateningly. "On the floor."

Silently Curt bent down with the box and then straightened, empty-handed.

"Now you can tell me what you're doing here," Mason said in a cold, clipped voice. "You better make it good."

"I can tell you that," his daughter said quickly. "We came for his cigarette lighter."

"Which was back here?"

"No."

"Then why come in here?"

"I'd mentioned your new revolver to him. He offered to tell me what make it was when I said I couldn't tell one from another."

"Very considerate of him."

"I've a right to be here," she said defensively. "I have permission to come in at night."

"But not to snoop among my things."

"I did the snooping," Curt said. "I tricked her into bringing me here. She's not responsible for any of it."

"It's his revolver," said Carol. "He recognized it. He said you took it from him the night he was — the night you knocked him out."

"I heard him."

"And that sketch——" Her face was white and strained. "He seems to think you were the one who——"

"So I slugged you," said Mason. "I spotted that rod under your coat the minute I walked into the old joint. Later on I kept my eye on it while everybody was busy getting oiled. You had a funny look about you, Prentice — like you were in a state of shock and ready to blow your top. When Carol invited you home, I decided not to take any chances. The minute you started prowling around I was right behind you. I needed your wallet to find out who you were."

"How many times have you used that line before?" Sensing the barb had struck home, Curt said, "Did you find out who I was? Or are you still in the dark?" He waited and then laughed, softly, without amusement, low in his throat. "That's the payoff, Mason. You still don't know the truth about me."

"What's the truth?" Carol de-

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manded. "What's this all about?"

Curt turned his gaze slowly toward her. "I'll tell you. I didn't make any mistake when I asked for somebody named Mason last Monday. I wasn't looking for any Henry Mason, though. I knew my man's name was Judd Mason."

The shiny dark eyes watched him over the menacing shape of the blue-black automatic.

"You said your father never talks about his old life as a cop back in Chicago. He has good reasons for keeping quiet about it. Most vice squad cops do, you know — their activities aren't exactly ideal for family discussion." He smiled again, mirthlessly.

Mason said, "Shut up," in a tight, hollow voice.

"I've just started," Curt said. "After all, you wanted to know who I am. Now you're going to find out.

"Just how good a memory have you, Mason? Do you remember a girl named Fay Prentice?" He forced himself to speak slowly and calmly, almost dispassionately, repressing the emotion seeking release inside him. "Two years ago this month — the night of April 23, to be exact — Fay Prentice and Alec Sanford went to a movie in the Loop in Chicago and then decided to visit a bar on South State Street, below Van Beuren. Neither of them ever had more than two drinks in an evening, but they went celebrating that night because the Germans were whipped and it looked as if I'd be coming home fairly soon . . ." He halted, fighting against a sudden trembling. "On their way back, though, they were stopped by a man who stepped out of an alley and ordered them to put up their hands. Ironically enough, they'd started back to the Loop to avoid being held up — so Alec got mad and tried to protest. It was the wrong thing to do. The man shot him three times through the groin and watched him collapse on the sidewalk."

Carol caught her breath sharply beside him. He ignored her, watching the motionless figure in the doorway. The shiny dark eyes were wary slits above the automatic in the unwavering hand.

"Yes, you shot him, Mason. You shot him wantonly and deliberately, without provocation — he didn't know you were in plain clothes — and then you arrested his sister." He had to close his eyes against a sudden painful burning behind his lids as the image in the doorway wavered momentarily. He said, against an overwhelming ache in his throat, "My wife, Mason! You called her a whore and worse and struck her across the mouth and placed her under arrest. She was thrown into jail on charges of soliciting. My wife, damn you! Alec couldn't help her. He died during the night, and you were praised for your action by the coroner's jury. Nobody else could help her. She was alone in the world, except for me — and I happened to be just a private first class over in Germany . . ." His voice shook. "So my wife was called a whore and treated like one of the street women she was locked up with . . ."

The brown-haired girl beside him suddenly put her hands to her face in a gesture of shame and pity and disgust.

He made himself go on. "But then — after two weeks of being held virtually incommunicado — Fay had a visitor — a lawyer who advised her to

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plead guilty and pay her fine as a first offender. She was terrified, ready to listen to anyone who could get her out of that place — but she had no money. He offered to advance the money to her. She was absolutely desperate by his time — so she took his advice and his money and found herself released . . . branded as a streetwalker. Then she went home to her apartment. That same evening the lawyer called on her. He had a companion — a very glib individual. His teeth were white, his hair was wavy, his clothes were sharp. When Fay told the lawyer it would take her some time to pay him the money he'd advanced her, he told her how he expected her to get it for him . . ."

His throat felt scarred with a burning ache, but he forced the words past the raw tissue.

"When she realized what he meant, she felt sick with horror. Maybe you couldn't understand, Mason. Prostitute to you . . . but she was my wife! Then she tried to make them get out, the lawyer instructed his companion take care of her. That scum! Someone called a man who spends his life a stud — breaking novices in — inducing them to a filthy life swine where you get your graft from . . ." He had to stop, his eyes hot and blurred. "After they left her — after they'd convinced her how it would be — she stayed in that room long enough to write a letter and mail it to me. Then she went out and drowned herself in the Chicago River."

The light bulb hummed thinly above him.

"I didn't get that letter for over three months, Mason. But I swore I'd find you — all of you . . . that lawyer, you, the punk who . . ." He had to stop again, rubbing his hand across his eyes. "It was too late to get the punk. He'd been knifed in a brawl before I ever came back to this country. The lawyer's still alive, but I decided to let him live after I found him. He has cancer of the throat, and by now it's incurable . . ." The thought of Mel Gitzer crossed his mind as he spoke — the beginning of the trail in Chicago . . . the end of it more than two thousand miles away. The moment toward which Gitzer had shaped his plans had arrived. "That left only you, Mason. I swore I'd find you. I didn't rest until I found you."

He was conscious of a curious change inside him when he stopped. His recital might have served as catharsis, purging him of all hate; instead, his pent-up emotion seemed to swirl faster and faster inside him, as though a deadly corrosive were being stirred with great force in his chest. His head threatened to burst with the sudden pounding flow of his blood in his temples. Then he found himself advancing slowly towards the stocky figure in the doorway, moving with the mechanical gait of a sleep-walker, oblivious to the automatic pointing directly at him.

Mason said, still expressionless, "Keep away, Prentice."

The words seemed faint and meaningless as a distant echo.

"I'm not fooling. Keep away."

He still moved forward, his hands clenched tightly at his sides. He felt impelled towards Mason by some inexplicable force, not knowing what he would do when he reached him, stirred by some obscure homicidal urge deep inside him. He moved closer, barely

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a foot away from the man in the open door.

Carol Mason cried out, "Don't! Please don't!"

He saw her father shift the Colt to his left hand. Then it slashed towards him in a fanglike motion too swift for him to dodge. Pain forked through his head in a cataclysmic burst of light. He staggered, momentarily paralyzed by the blow, unable either to defend himself or to attempt to retaliate. The automatic lashed out again in a slicing movement. The tip of the muzzle drew blood from the flesh above his cheek bone.

Carol cried, "Oh, no! Don't, don't!"

A curious half-smile hovered under the clipped mustache. Curt watched it as Mason struck at him again. He twisted awkwardly away and caught the blow on the fleshy part of his shoulder. The smile still played about the tight mouth, mirthless as the fixed grimace of lockjaw, like a smirk of pleased horror. It was the facial hallmark of a sadist. He had seen it once before in the army, and it fascinated him. He stood still, as if transfixed in admiration for the brutal skill of a man long practiced in his craft and still capable of attaining pleasure from his handiwork. The Colt flashed in the light again. The muzzle edge ripped at his scalp, just above his forehead, with deadly force.

"You can't, you can't!" Carol cried out in shocked despair. "Stop it!"

Through the painful haze clouding his eyes he saw Carol trying to pull her father away from him. Mason shook her off, absently, impatiently, as though she were a playful puppy interfering with a domestic task. She came back at him, clawing at his arm. A look of annoyance crossed his face; it bore no recognition of her as his daughter. He turned slightly and struck her across the side of her face with the back of his hand. The blow sent her reeling backward against the wall.

Curt forced himself forward, raising his limp fist with a supreme effort of will. The revolver flashed towards him again. The last thing he remembered was the sound of Carol sobbing somewhere beyond the fixed half-smile under the clipped mustache.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WAKING was a worse horror than usual. It involved more than the reluctant return to consciousness — the dawning realization of inconsolable loneliness . . . the cringing away from a hostile world. His body was a sodden ache. His head throbbed sickeningly with pain. The pain flowed over him in searing waves. Their ebb and crest brought recurrent waves of threatened nausea. His body broke out with sweat, shaking uncontrollably, like a malaria attack as he lay on his bed.

Then it slowly came to him — the cruel rise and fall of the revolver in the clenched hand . . . the light beating down from the naked bulb in the middle of the ceiling. An abrupt blank filled his mind, as though symbolizing his escape into unconsciousness. He strained against the empty grayness trying to remember. Slowly the image he sought floated into his head — huddled behind the wheel of his car i

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the parking lot . . . wondering dully how he had got there. It had been late — after four in the morning. At last he had goaded himself into action, starting the car and driving back to the lot near the hotel. Then another blank blotted out the images. He was unable to recall the journey from the parking lot to his room.

The muffled rasp of the telephone roused him from his sick torpor. Its faint shrillness came to him across a vast ocean of woolly gray clouds. He wanted to ignore it, but the noise had the thin inexorability of a dentist's drill. A great weight lurched inside his head as he raised himself from the bed. Its dense mass slid heavily to the rear of his skull.

His voice sounded thick and surly in his ears when he lifted the receiver. "Hello?"

A lazy quicksilver laugh came across the wire, neatly confined within the diaphragm against his ear. "Did you really have that kind of night?"

"Who is this?"

"I'm hurt," Nedda Kendall said in a pouting voice. "I was sure you'd recognize me."

He lay silent, not answering her.

"I thought you were *simpatico,* you beast, but you're nothing but a lout who works in a cheap penny arcade. You're a peasant."

He repressed an impulse to hang up the receiver, knowing the slightest movement would send the weight crashing blackly through his aching head.

"Are you still half asleep?" she asked. "Did I wake you up?"

"I was awake."

"But in an unbrilliant sort of way . . ." She laughed again. "I don't know why I bother with you, Prentice."

"What time is it?" he asked.

"It's almost twelve. Twelve noon, that is — if you've lost that much track of time." Her voice changed. "You've become a vice with me," she said. "You're worse than yo-yo. I still want to talk to you."

Abruptly, inexplicably, he thought of Carol Mason. Her face drifted through his mind, fading in the instant it appeared. Senseless anger suddenly burned through him.

"When?" he asked.

"I'm sure you haven't eaten yet. Come over here for lunch."

"What time?"

"One-thirty?"

"Make it two," he said. "A little after two. Good-by."

Cradling the receiver was an enervating physical effort. His hand fumbled clumsily with the depressor slot on the pedestal. The noise, in odd contrast to the faint ringing which had aroused him, seemed deafening. He slumped back on the bed. The great black weight in his head shifted sickeningly and sliced across his brain.

He had to kill Mason.

There was no longer any doubt in his mind. He had to kill him. The degrading humiliation of his beating had resolved all his conflicting doubts and intentions into a determination direct and unwavering as the trajectory of a bullet.

After he had dressed he went back to the bathroom for his discarded suit and shirt and removed his remaining clothes from the dresser and packed them in his valise. His lips parted in a bleak half-smile. The business of execution was being forced on him.

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The tie clasp was gone. There was no evidence left against Mason.

After he had finished his cigarette, he squashed out the stub in the glass ash tray on the dresser and then picked up his key and left the room and locked the door. The sunlight hurt his eyes when he reached the street. He put on the dark polaroid glasses he had used while driving across the desert. His bruised face became anonymous.

In Beverly Hills he drove slowly up the winding road to the opened iron gates outside the curving driveway leading to the big white colonial house.

Nedda Kendall opened the door. To his surprise she was unsmiling. Her face was pale and troubled under the lavish gilt of her loosely combed hair. She wore a chartreuse pullover sweater and man-tailored slacks — the direct antithesis of all the grubby, sweater-clad females who frequented the arcade.

Her clear blue eyes quickly appraised his face. "What's happened?"

Her hands gripped his arms with unexpected urgency. He wondered whether to tell her the truth. His humiliation was already returning, touched off the moment he faced her across the threshold. A masochistic urge to aggravate it came to him.

"You wouldn't want to know."

"Tell me!"

"Judd Mason."

"I thought so!" Her words came out in a whisper. "I thought it would be . . ."

He watched her. "What makes you say that?"

She shook her head. "Come in the patio."

They went through the house in silence, and he wondered if his subconscious reluctance to kill had tricked him again. The patio was bright and yet cool, bathed in a filtered green light which shone through the lacy foliage of a nearby pepper tree.

"What would you like to drink?"

"Anything."

"Scotch?"

"All right."

She poured two drinks and dropped ice cubes in the glasses and came back to him. They sat down on a cushioned chaisette together. The liquor was at once raw and soothing in his throat.

"What made you think Mason beat me up?" he asked bluntly.

She looked away. "There's no need to talk about it."

"I think there is."

"Stubborn!" Putting down her drink, she linked her hands behind his neck. "You might kiss me." She shook him, smiling lazily, her hands tightening at the back of his neck. "Peasant . . ."

She let her body fall against him, her mouth lifted to his face. He kissed her, conscious of the heavy, sultry fragrance of her perfume, the softness of her skin, the quick beat of a pulse in her throat. It meant nothing to him. Her mouth was knowing and insatiable, but there was no response inside him.

"You might co-operate," she murmured.

"What about Mason?"

"Forget him. He's vicious and dangerous. You'll only get hurt if you get curious about him." She made to break loose, but he held her fast.

"You might as well get used to the idea," he said. "I'm going to get the truth from you."

Her body went limp in his arms.

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"All right . . ." She avoided looking at him. "If you must know, Mason was here just before you came. He — he's trying to blackmail me."

"Why?"

"I lied to the police. He knows about it."

"Lied? About Lenore Sorel, you mean?"

She nodded, still not looking at him. "I went to see Lenore last Monday morning — the day before she was killed. I told her Victor and I were engaged and wanted to get married. I'd known she was possessive, but I hadn't known how much. It ended up in a terrific quarrel." Her slim shoulders shrugged listlessly under her sweater. "Mason knows about it."

"How did he find out?"

"Apparently he saw Lenore later that afternoon. She told him I'd been there."

"You mean he's trying to blackmail you on the strength of that?"

A sardonic shadow of a smile crossed her face. "That isn't all. I didn't tell the police I called on her the morning she was killed."

"Wha-at?"

"I hadn't told Victor about my first visit — he'd been busy getting things organized at the gallery all day. I decided I'd try to patch things up with Lenore before she let him know about it. I arrived there around nine-thirty Tuesday morning — about twenty after nine, actually — but she wasn't home. I wanted to write a note to let her know I'd called, but I'd forgotten to put a pen or a pencil in my purse — so then I left and went shopping and called her at ten to ten from a pay booth. There wasn't any answer. I didn't bother to call her again."

"Mason knows about that, too?"

"He came to call on Lenore after I left. That must've been around ten, I suppose — maybe later. He found a match book I'd dropped by accident when I rummaged through my purse to find something to write with. It had my monogram on it — so he knew I'd been there ahead of him."

"Did he see Lenore?"

"He says he didn't go inside."

"Why not?"

"He didn't say, and I didn't ask him. I was too scared to do or say anything after he told me what he knew."

"How much did you pay him?"

"Nothing yet. I didn't have enough cash on hand. He wants five thousand in small bills by noon tomorrow."

"Are you going to pay him?"

"What else can I do?"

The helpless anxiety in her voice puzzled him.

"That doesn't make sense," he said. "If you're innocent ——"

"That's not the point!"

"What is the point?"

"I can't afford notoriety. I told you that the other night. That's why I kept quiet in the first place."

"If you mean you'll pay blackmail even though you know you're innocent ——"

"That's exactly what I mean!" Springing up from the chaisette, she faced him with a curious desperation, almost as if at bay. "I know what I'm doing! I can't risk any kind of scandal. Horace wasn't stingy when we split up, but his money has strings tied to it. I can marry again, and he'll still keep paying something to me, but the faintest hint of scandal washes us up. If I'm smeared all over the front pages

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in connection with a murder charge, our contract's broken. I'll be flat broke."

"Why should that worry you so much? You're going to marry Sorel, aren't you?"

"Do you think Vic will want to if he thinks I killed his sister?"

He sat motionless on the chaisette, not answering her. It was an ironic situation. Her story, if true, served to affirm his suspicions. Mason was undeniably guilty, and yet he had the audacity to attempt blackmail. By forcing her to pay for his silence he guaranteed her own silence about him.

"You can see what I'm up against," she said. "What else can I do?"

"It doesn't matter." He stood up. "Do whatever you think best. It's between you and Mason."

"You're not going?"

"I've got to."

"But we were going to have lunch——"

"I'm not hungry."

She put her hand on his arm, coming close to him. "Curt . . ."

"No," he said. "I shouldn't have come out here in the first place."

"I wanted you to. You're not right for me, but I can't help it. You shouldn't have walked into my life with that scowling face."

"Sorry." He moved toward the house.

"Curt!"

She came toward him as he turned.

"You're going to see Mason?"

He nodded.

"Wait," she said. "Don't go."

He waited in the high-ceilinged entrance hall while she went into a room adjoining the South Seas room. A tingling silence gathered around him. Impatience moved through him. He felt as though he were being kept from keeping an appointment which could never be rescheduled if it were once broken. In another moment she returned to the hall, walking slowly and gravely toward him.

"You may need this."

He looked down at her outstretched hand. She was holding a small .22-caliber revolver toward him. It looked like an expensive toy with its short, narrow muzzle and light pearl handle.

"Not to use," she said — "but it might be useful."

He took it from her, weighing it in his hand.

"Yes, it might," he said. "It might be very useful."

He slipped it in his pocket and opened the door and went quickly down the steps to his car.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was almost seven by the time he reached Glendale. Cars were lined along the curbs on all the narrow residential streets. Sprinklers whirled, splashing silver drops over the front lawns. He was unable to find a parking space near the Mason bungalow. He was forced to park a block away, on a side street, and walk to the house.

When he rang the door bell, the buzzer rasped waspishly inside the door. There was no answer. He rang again, waiting with curious patience, as though his emotions were held temporarily in frigid suspension. There was still no answer. He twisted the

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door knob. To his surprise it turned in his hand. The door came open. He stepped inside the quiet house.

There was no one at home. He walked through the house to make certain it was empty and then returned to the living room. The thought of searching for evidence against Mason came to him, but it was short lived. There was no need for evidence. There was no time for it. He was no longer the prosecutor. He was both jury and executioner.

It was after nine when headlights shone briefly through the living-room windows. A car had turned in at the driveway. He sat motionless on the divan. The car halted outside. Its engine died, and a door opened and slammed with a tiny sound. He heard the service door open at the back of the house. A light came on in the kitchen. He remained unmoving on the divan, feeling himself getting colder, his stomach contracting in a hard ball.

It was Carol who had come home. Still waiting silently on the divan, feeling himself slowly relax his tension, he watched her approach in slim, diminutive silhouette. She halted in the doorway and reached for the wall switch.

She gasped, her hand to her throat, "Oh!" as the light brought the room into expanding focus.

He kept his face impassive. She wore the cardigan box coat she had worn to the club and the gallery. Its opened front revealed a striped blue-and-black dress. Her face was wan and troubled under her spent brown curls, and yet she seemed younger than ever, almost childlike in her defenselessness.

"How long have you been here?"

"Not long."

"How did you get in?"

"Somebody forgot to lock the front door."

"Oh. It didn't catch again, then. Why did you come here?"

"I think you know why."

"He won't be home——"

"I can wait."

Her voice quavered. "About last night——" She paused, biting her lip. "I tried to get you to your hotel, but he wouldn't let me. He left you in your car and then made me go home with him."

"We don't have to talk about it. I got back to my room all right."

"I want to talk about it," she said low. "I learned a lot of things I hadn't known."

"About your father?"

"About both of you." She hesitated. "I didn't know you'd been married."

He sat silent, damning his luck, determined not to let her presence evoke new confusion and undecision. When your wife was dead, more than one girl would be bound to remind you of her. He had to be coldly logical about it.

"Were you really going to kill him?"

"Why do you think I had him traced?"

"It wouldn't have done you any good. You'd only have thrown your own life away."

"What makes you think that's any great sacrifice?"

"But there's always something to live for!" she cried. "There's so much to fight for — all over the world——"

"It's not my world, thanks."

"Do you think you're the first person who ever lost someone he loved?" she demanded with sudden anger. "Do you think you've suddenly invented

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personal tragedy after all these thousands of years of human suffering?"

"I know," he said. "Your mother died."

"Not only my mother."

The tragic dignity in her voice stirred instinctive, unthinking compassion inside him.

"I've loved someone, too," she said. "I know what it is to be lonely. He was young, too — younger than you. I've hated the world — everyone in it — thinking how we had everything to live for. We had a whole life to share, but now he's buried in Normandy. His name was David. He was kind — he liked to laugh . . . now he's dead, too — like the girl you drew . . ."

He made no response. There was too much danger in succumbing to pity. He had to remain immune to her grief. His decision had been made — her father had to die.

"So now you know about me, too," she said quietly. Then, looking at him with troubled eyes, she said, "He didn't do it. I'm sure he didn't."

"Do what?"

"Kill Lenore Sorel."

Silence linked and separated them, like a barricaded bridge span.

"What makes you think he's guilty?"

"I didn't say that!"

"It's what you mean," he said remorselessly. "What makes you suspect him?"

"I — I don't. I mean I — I don't know what to think."

"Shall I tell you why I suspect him?"

"Then you do think he's guilty!"

He nodded shortly. "Yes."

Her eyes were fixed on him, deeply hazel, solemnly questioning. "Why?"

"A number of reasons. Because he's killed before and liked it and got away with it. Because he stole my Luger, and Lenore Sorel was killed with a Luger. Because I found his tie clasp in the Sorel apartment the morning she was murdered, and he took it from my pocket after he beat me up last night."

"That isn't evidence enough to convict a man."

"Plus the fact that he's blackmailing Nedda Kendall ——"

"I don't believe it!"

"He's demanded five thousand in cash from her by tomorrow noon. It's his price for keeping quiet about what she's withheld from the police."

"Then she's the one who's guilty!"

"I thought you didn't believe he'd blackmail her?"

"I — I don't know. If he is ——"

"I'll prove it to you," he said. "I'll call her." He went to the telephone on the little stand in the hallway. "What's her number?"

She told him in a flat, spiritless voice. "You'll have to dial the operator. It's a toll call from here."

She waited in the middle of the room while he stood in the hallway, listening to the spaced ringing in the receiver. Her face was white and empty and hollow-eyed, reminding him of a child awaiting the destruction of a cherished illusion by a malicious adult. At last he cradled the receiver.

"She isn't home."

"Suppose I believe you?"

"What?"

"About my father blackmailing ——"

The shrilling telephone cut across her mumbled words like a falling blade. He froze, turning toward her. It rang again. He turned around and lifted the receiver and held it out toward her. She came forward in silence.

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"Hello?" Her face remained expressionless. "Yes . . . no — no, there isn't . . . all right — yes, I know . . . goodby."

The receiver grated against its pedestal. The call had taken little more than thirty seconds.

"Your father?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"Is he coming here?"

"No," she mumbled. "He'll be late."

"Where is he going to be?"

"He didn't say."

"You're such a poor liar," he said. She looked at him helplessly, her fingers curling tremblingly toward her palms, her clenched hands jerking in spastic little movements against the line of her thighs under her striped skirt.

"Where will he be?"

"He said he was going to Simon Cotton's."

"Cotton?"

"Yes. To his studio."

"Why there?" He walked around the room, frowning, softly beating his fist into his cupped palm.

"I don't know what it means," she said. "He's never told me anything. I don't know what's happened."

He turned suddenly and made for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"To Cotton's."

"You can't!"

"Why can't I?"

"You don't even know where it ——"

"I can find out."

She came after him, seizing his arm. "Don't go alone! Take me with you!"

He stopped short, arrested by the naked emotion in her voice. The thought of her beside him as he fired point-blank at her father flashed through his mind. He blotted out the image and pried her fingers loose from his sleeve starting away from here.

"I'll call the police!" she cried. "I'll tell them you ——"

The slamming door cut her words short. He went quickly down the dark steps to the path leading to the street. The door opened and closed behind him almost immediately. Footsteps tapped urgently behind him in the darkness. She came even with him, clutching his arm.

"I won't let you ruin your life! Killing him won't bring her back to you!" She had to run to keep up with his accelerated pace. "I'll scream if you don't take me! I mean it — I'll scream and scream ——"

"All right, then," he said, repressing an impulse to shout at her. "All right — I'll take you."

They walked to the car in silence. Their drive into Hollywood was equally silent.

"This next street," she said at last. "He's at the top. It's a deadend street."

The car faltered halfway up the climbing road. He shifted into second. They drove past several houses which were dark. The bungalow at the crest of the slope was also dark. There were no other cars nearby. The only noise came from the crickets fiddling in the darkness.

"Shall we go in?" Carol whispered.

"Go ahead."

He followed her across uneven flagstones and then went quickly up concrete steps to the entrance door. The house seemed shapeless, without recognizable form in the darkness. She took the pencil-shaped flashlight from her purse and turned it on the Chinese-red door. He forewent the courtesy of knocking and tried the handle. The door swung open into dark stillness. The narrow flashlight beam poked

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across the threshold like a thrusting yellow finger.

Carol breathed a sickened "Agh!" and shuddered against him.

Judd Mason lay sprawled disjointedly on the floor in front of them. The shiny, brown eyes glinted unblinkingly in the pallid glare of the flashlight. Blood had trickled down his face in a dark skein from a wound just above his right ear.

There was good reason for his daughter to stand trembling before him.

He was dead.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

For an instant longer Judd Mason lay crumpled in the scant area of light provided by the pocket torch. Then he vanished into darkness as the flashlight slipped from his daughter's fingers. The thin metal cylinder thudded softly on the floor in the dark. She swayed. and Curt quickly caught her. An animal-like moaning sound escaped her. He dug his fingers into her arms, shaking her.

"Get hold of yourself," he whispered. "Don't get hysterical."

"He's dead!"

"Will you be quiet?" He shook her again. "Will you?"

Slowly she regained control over her shattered nerves.

"Sorry," she murmured at last. "I'll be all right now."

He held her for another moment and then released her and stooped to grope on the floor for the fallen flashlight. His hand brushed the dead man's sleeve. He jerked it instinctively away, feeling his heart accelerate at the contact. He swore underbreath at his childishness and then touched the pencil-sized torch and picked it up and flashed its anemic rays at Judd Mason. The pale beam picked out a revolver on the carpet. He picked it up. It was a Luger automatic. It was the model Mason had taken from him.

"What shall we do?" Carol whispered.

He stood up, sniffing the muzzle. The automatic had been fired only recently. "We've got to get out of here."

"What about the police?"

Her question stopped him. The dead man lying at their feet symbolized more than an execution that had been taken out of his hands. It was more than a matter of being both cheated and saved — although robbed of vengeance, he had been rescued from committing murder — and it was something more than an ironic climax to his quest. Then the full import of his new position struck him. The moment the murder was revealed — if Gitzer went to the police with what he knew . . .

"What about the police?" Carol repeated.

The little muscles along his jaw line tightened as he looked down at her questioning face. In his determination to prove her father guilty he had shut his eyes to the likelihood of other suspects. He had refused to consider any complication which might have confounded his premise. Now his theory was invalidated by the irrefutable reality of death. Someone other than Judd Mason had killed Lenore Sorel. Mason had been murdered because he had known who had killed her.

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"They'll have some embarrassing questions for us if we call them," he said. "They'll want to know why my revolver was used."

"Your revolver?" Then she saw its dull metallic glint in his hand. "Oh . . ." Her breath came out in a helpless sigh. "But if you tell them the truth ——"

"If I do that, it'll be awkward for both of us. I'll have to explain how your — how he got it from me in the first place . . . then how he beat me up last night and what I intended to do about it tonight. We might find it a little hard to convince them I didn't kill him."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," he said. "In the meantime, whoever did it has a fine chance to get away scot-free — as happened with Lenore Sorel . . ."

"You mean whoever killed my father killed her?"

"It looks like it."

"But if he came here to meet Simon Cotton — and the police are looking for Cotton ——"

"That means Cotton may be guilty."

"Do you think he is?"

"I don't know what to think now."

"But who else would arrange to meet my father here?"

"Lloyd Bradford, Claude Guthrie, Nedda Ken ——"

"Of course!" she said in a fierce whisper. "She's the one!"

"Now, wait ——"

"She told him she'd pay him his hush money here tonight and then waited for him — that's how it was!"

"But we don't know ——"

"She wasn't home when you called her tonight!"

"But that doesn't mean ——"

"I've distrusted her from the first — but I knew you wouldn't believe me ——" Her hand suddenly gripped his wrist. "I don't blame you for suspecting my father. I can't honestly say I'm sorry he's dead. He was cruel and deceitful — I was afraid of him. But if you're really honest with yourself now — if you're not infatuated with her ——"

He switched off the flashlight, cloaking them in darkness. "What?"

"She's beautiful and wealthy, and she takes what she wants. Men like that kind of woman."

"Oh, my God," he said. "Forget the philosophy. We've got to make up our minds about this business. Either we call the police and wait for them — or we can leave now and call on Nedda and see if she has anything to tell us."

"Tell us what?"

"Not that she shot him — nothing as simple as that — but she might give herself away in one or another . . ."

He waited in the dark for her decision.

"You're right," she said at last. "We can't call the police."

"You want to go visiting?"

"If you think it'll accomplish anything ——"

"We can try," he said. "Let's get out of here."

He wiped the handles on both sides of the door with his handkerchief before they went outside to the porch. The immediate darkness seemed impenetrable. He was absently aware of the tireless concert of the unseen insects all around them as he slipped the Luger into his pocket and gave Carol her flashlight.

"Why did you take the revolver?"

"It might be traced overnight. I don't know how fast the police can work."

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They went down the steps and along the flagstones to the car.

"If we could get out of here without any noise——" He surveyed the descending road. "If I release the brake and swing backward into the driveway, I may be able to head it forward and then coast down . . ."

Getting in the car, they closed the doors quietly on both sides. He released the brake and twisted the wheel and let the car roll back into the driveway. Then he applied the foot brake and turned the wheel to the left and released the pressure on the brake. For a moment the car seemed to hover indecisively between going backward or forward. Then it slowly rolled forward, moving downhill. He was soon forced to check their momentum with the foot brake. At the lower part of the slope he slipped out his clutch and then put the car into third gear. The engine caught when he let in the clutch. He switched on the headlights. They drove down to Sunset Boulevard.

The Saturday night traffic seemed unaccountably thin.

"What time is it?"

She held her wrist to the window, looking at her watch in the passing glare of a street light. "Five past twelve."

Their speed increased under his foot pressure.

"Not too fast," she warned. "You might be picked up."

He slowed down, but his mind raced ahead of the diminished speed of their turning wheels. Everything had been changed for him. The future was no longer a sudden drop into oblivion—it stretched interminably before him. His compulsion toward self destruction had left him. He wanted to live. He couldn't let Gitzer and circumstances defeat him. The realization was an astonishing one. Without warning Fay had ceased to be a restless, tormented image of his mind. Together with Alec, she had abruptly become a memory among other memories, poignant but not tortuous, not an agonized voice calling out for surcease and atonement in the lonely hours of the night. His wife and his friend had released him from the bondage of vengeance.

As they entered the Beverly Hills district, he slowed the car on the edge of a wooded gully. The murder weapon had to be traced before its ownership could be attributed to him. He stopped the car and wiped the Luger with his handkerchief and then tossed it from the open window far into the darkness. The revolver landed with a faint crashing noise far below them.

Carol remained silent as they drove on. He made no attempt to talk to her. He had an odd feeling of time rushing past him, as though events were suddenly moving too swiftly for his analysis or comprehension. His last few months had been directed towards the single goal of killing Mason. With his goal suddenly taken from him, he felt troubled, bewildered, directionless.

When they reached the curving driveway leading to the big white colonial house, they saw three cars parked in front of the imposing entrance. Lights blazed from the downstairs windows.

"Company," he said.

"I recognize the cars," she said. "Sorel, Bradford, Guthrie."

"Are you sure you want to go in?"

"If you think it'll help——"

He shrugged carelessly, concealing his anxiety, thinking about Mel Gitzer.

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"About all we can do is keep our mouths shut and our ears open . . ."

She ducked her head in agreement. "Of course. I'm ready now."

It was Claude Guthrie who opened the door. His full-lipped Byronic face lighted with surprise when he saw Carol.

"Well, hello!" He glanced at Curt's bruised face with covert curiosity. "Come in, come in!"

"I hope we're not barging in . . ."

"Of course not!" A faint hint of chypre emanated from his elegant slimness as he closed the door after them. "How've you been, Prentice?"

Curt ignored the question behind the question. "Busy, thanks."

Voices came to them from the end of the hall. Ice tinkled in glasses as Guthrie smilingly led the way toward the play room. Cigarette smoke drifted in gray chiffon strands through the opened door.

Nedda Kendall was sitting on the rattan divan facing the door, a glass in her hand, in a bronze-colored brocade hostess gown. "Well, hi!"

Carol said, "We didn't mean to break in on anything . . ."

"What makes you think you have?" drawled the blonde girl. "Come in and have a drink. Two drinks, I should say."

Victor Sorel mixed their drinks at the bar, cloaked in a kind of subdued elegance behind the illuminated aquarium. "Well, this is a pleasant surprise. I didn't know you two were so friendly."

Carol forced a brief shadow of a smile. "Oh, yes . . ."

Curt took his drink in both hands, tightening his fingers about the chill glass. "Thanks."

Moving to a rattan lounge chair, he wondered if his imagination were tricking him or if the distrust and suspicion he sensed in the air were actually present, pervasive and noxious as invisible poison gas. It was a disquieting sensation. For a moment he felt as though he were the cause and the target of suspicion, but then, as he looked around at the indecipherable faces, he realized the tension had existed before he had entered the room.

Claude Gurthrie said, "How's the career at the arcade, Prentice?"

"Flourishing, thanks."

"I thought you were going to bring me that drawing?"

"I — I've been tied up. I'll drop by the first chance I get — if you're still interested."

"Definitely."

The awkwardness lingered in the colorful room.

"Well, I need another drink," Nedda said abruptly. "Victor?"

The suave, graying man took her empty glass and returned to the bar.

"Did the police find out anything new today?" she asked.

Sorel shook his head, not turning to look at her. "Things are still the same."

"Why is that? Why can't they produce results?"

Curt studied her unobtrusively from behind his glass. The querulous note in her voice sounded real enough. Enough so, he thought, to make her guilt seem doubtful. Perhaps it was Simon Cotton who was the real culprit. The artist had been a fugitive all week. It took more than the near-paranoiac cunning of a prolonged drinking bout to motivate his sustained avoidance of capture.

Sorel crossed the room to the divan. "The police are doing their utmost,

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Nedda. I have complete faith in them."

The blonde girl shrugged, rattling the ice in her glass. "Well, I don't believe in being too dishonest. We can all feel broken about Lenore, but we'll have to admit not many people liked her. Personally I always thought she had the sharpest tongue this side of Alexander Woollcott."

Claude Guthrie said coldly, "Must you, Nedda?"

"Oh, don't go frigid on me, Claude. I always prefer to tell the truth — not right away, maybe, but eventually. It helps to clear the air. I'm sure Vic understands, even if you don't." Raising her glass to her lips, she drank slowly in a long silence and then brooded blankly over the rim. "As a matter of fact, I'll always be sorry my last words with her weren't too friendly." She shook her head, sighing. "I'll always be sorry I couldn't reach her the morning she was killed."

Lloyd Bradford leaned forward. "Reach her?"

Curt felt his nerves contract in a taut knot under his diaphragm. He wondered if she were deliberately skirting thin ice for reasons of her own or if the nervousness under her careless manner were actually close to panic. If she had killed Mason less than two hours before . . .

"I 'phoned her to say I was sorry about our squabble," she said. "But there wasn't any answer."

"What time was that?" asked Claude Guthrie.

"Oh, about ten to ten. I remember looking at my watch. I wish I'd been able to talk to her now."

Victor Sorel leaned comfortingly over her from behind the divan. "It's over now, Nedda. Don't fret about it."

The blonde girl shook her hair back in an obvious effort to throw off her temporary depression. "Why isn't everybody drinking? Or would you all rather have coffee?"

Lloyd Bradford stood up. "No, thanks, Nedda." His face seemed set and brooding. "I think I'll be on my way."

"But you can't run out on me like this!" Nedda rose quickly from the divan. "At least stay for just one cup of coffee!" Moving toward the doorway to forestall any further objections, she turned and smiled at Curt. "Would you like to help me, Prentice? I need an assistant, and I know Carol wants to stay and entertain the boys."

Absurdly, annoyingly, a faint flush seeped under his skin as he joined her. They crossed the entrance hall in a silence that seemed to echo the silence they had left behind them in the playroom. She pushed open a swinging door. She turned, standing close against him.

"Kiss me."

As she spoke, she swayed against him. Her arms went around his neck, pulling him close. He kissed her, knowing there was nothing else he could do, ruefully aware of his suspicion surrendering to the instinctive compulsion she possessed for him. She was the kind of woman a man could kill for — or be killed for . . . the thought had a sinister turn to it. But then, as they stood in close embrace, he thought he heard the door move behind them. The sound was no more than a faint click in the darkness, as if it were being held open a scant inch, followed by a sighing sound as it quietly fell back into place.

"Where's the light switch?"

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She turned away from him. The wall switch clicked with thin finality. She smiled at his frowning face under the clinical glare reflected from the white tiled walls.

"Why so worried?"

He took out his handkerchief. "The war certainly did wonders for me. It made me irresistible."

"Well, aren't you?"

"They're waiting for coffee in there."

"Poor them!" Shrugging, she turned and opened a cabinet door above her. There was little more than a teaspoon of coffee in the can. There were no other cans on the shelves. "Well, that's what happens when you have no help . . ." Then she smiled drunkenly, squeezing his arm. "But who cares? You can come back later."

"I called you earlier about that——"

Her smile vanished. "What time?"

"I don't remember. There wasn't any answer."

She said sharply, almost waspishly, "I was out riding," and then thrust her hand into his pocket. "I don't think you'll need this now."

"Wait, now — before you——"

Her sudden appropriation of her pearl-handled pistol prompted him to question her still further, but she had already pushed open the swinging door. He switched off the light and followed her across the hall. Carol was sitting on the divan, talking to Victor Sorel. Claude Guthrie was standing before a Gauguin, studying it through half-closed eyes. Lloyd Bradford had been out of the room. He came through the studio doorway as they joined the others.

"My housekeeping rates minus zero," Nedda announced ruefully. "I don't have enough coffee left for two decent cups."

Victor Sorel smiled wryly at her confession.

"Sweet, why fret?" asked Claude Guthrie. "It's time I was leaving, anyway. Curfew hour for me, you know."

"But it's still early!" she protested, consulting the heart-shaped watch pinned to her gown. "It's only twelve-fifteen."

"Twenty to one," Lloyd Bradford corrected. "You're a half hour slow, Nedda."

"Is it really that late?"

Claude Guthrie nodded. "To the second, darling."

"Well, damn this watch! I keep meaning to take it to the jeweler. I should've done it while I was shopping Tuesday. It's been losing half an hour every twenty-four hours or so unless I check it every day."

"Next time you go out, Nedda . . ."

"Yes. I'll have to remember it next time."

Her guests clustered on the threshold in the customary postponement of actual leavetaking. The tension which had pervaded the atmosphere like a sinister miasma seemed to have vanished.

"If you'll excuse me a moment," said Sorel, "I'll get my hat."

Bradford grinned. "He's the only man in all southern California who wears a hat. It's that old-world training. He'd feel naked without it."

"Oh, incidentally," said Guthrie, "I ought to call Carlos before I leave."

"Go right ahead, Claude. You know where the 'phone is."

Carol began talking to Bradford in low tones in the corner.

Nedda said, low, "Are you coming back?"

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Curt shook his head. "You need to get some rest."

"You mean I'm tight?"

"You've had enough to drink."

She giggled. "I'm floating."

An angry thought crossed his mind. Was her drunkenness feigned or real? What was her real reason for wanting to see him after the others had left? His feeling that he was being used as a scapegoat returned to him. He wanted to shake her.

Claude Guthrie reappeared. "Well, thanks for everything, Nedda."

Then Victor Sorel called to them from the hall. "Everyone ready?"

They joined him at the door in a murmurous exchange of trivialities. The night air was cool and fresh after the smoky closeness of the playroom. They moved down the steps to their cars.

"Good night, Nedda!"

"Good night, everyone!"

"Good night!"

Bradford was the first to pull away from the house. Sorel was second in line. Guthrie followed him in the long cream-colored convertible.

"Shall we just stay behind?" asked Carol.

"No." He wondered why he said nothing about Nedda's invitation. "We'll have to appear to leave with them."

He started the car and switched on the headlights and followed the other cars down the curving driveway to the descending road.

"Maybe we should've notified the police."

"We'll wait until morning," he said. "Somebody's sure to find him."

"Maybe they won't. There's no reason for anybody to go near the house."

"Cotton might come back ——" The inadequacy of his reply struck him immediately. "Not that he'd be too eager to call the police . . ."

"He may even have done it."

"I thought you were sure Nedda Kendall was responsible?"

"Didn't you find that out?"

"No."

"Didn't she tell you anything in the kitchen?"

"Nothing."

"Did you enjoy kissing her?"

He kept his eyes on the road, remembering the soft click of the kitchen door in the darkness.

"My lips are sealed," he said. "Do you want to go back and talk to her?"

"No!"

"Good," he said. "Then we'll go back."

He checked his speed down the descending grade. The cars which had preceded him had already disappeared. At the bottom of the hill he halted for the traffic on Sunset Boulevard and then went around the long block and crossed the boulevard and started up the road they had come down.

"The police will question us, won't they?" Anxiety had replaced the irritation in her voice. "I mean — no matter what happens — when they find his body ——"

"Don't let it scare you. We weren't at Cotton's place long enough for our trip from Glendale out here to seem too long. Just remember it's news to you when they tell you he's dead. Don't break down and talk too much."

"I'll try not to."

They drove up the winding road and then turned into the driveway. Under the quicksilver blaze of their headlights the curving macadam strip rolled

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toward them like an illuminated tape being swallowed up under the car. Ahead of them the house loomed up darkly against the night sky.

"Do you think she's gone to bed already?"

"I doubt it," he said. "Just the front lights are off."

He stopped the car outside the imposing white-columned façade.

"I hope we're doing the right thing."

"We are."

They went up the steps toward the door.

"The car!" Carol cried suddenly.

He turned. The sedan was slowly rolling down the driveway. Either the emergency brake had slipped or he had failed to pull it back to the last notch. It was hardly cause for undue alarm.

He said, "'Go ahead and ring," and ran down the steps, sprinting after the car as it gained momentum on the gradual downgrade. It was headed directly for a bed of rose bushes. He leaped on the running board as the vehicle reached the border of lawn and leaned inside the opened window and jerked back the emergency brake.

The sudden jolt threw him against the windshield frame and then bounced him back against the metal door jamb. He felt both shocks deep as the bone. But the car was halted in time — the roses remained unharmed. He opened the door and slipped behind the wheel and started the motor.

As he pushed the gear shift into reverse, he looked into the rearview mirror before backing toward the house. Without warning the small rectangular glass shone with a red burst of light. A hollow, muffled explosion thudded behind him, like a fist striking bare flesh. Flame bloomed viciously in the mirror.

The house behind him was on fire.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

For a moment the sight stunned him. The house, seen in miniature in the glass, was suffused with a crimson glow, like a rosy Christmas-tree ornament. Then fire sprang up in darting little shoots of flame.

Carol, he thought — Nedda . . .

Instantly the thought of them stung him into action. He switched off the ignition and yanked back the emergency brake, leaving the car frozen in reverse gear. The windows in the house glowed fiery red as he ran up the driveway — he thought irrelevantly of the isinglass apertures of an old-fashioned coal stove. The vicious crackling sound of burning wood came to him, blotting out the noise of the crickets.

Carol lay limp across the threshold of the entrance hall. The door hung askew on its hinges. Hot air pushed against him from the faint frenzied roar of flames at the end of the hall. She lay in a crumpled, disjointed heap, strangely like her father's dead body sprawled on the floor in Cotton's house. He stooped and lifted her in his arms. There was almost no weight to her. He carried her down the steps to the lawn across the driveway.

Stooping again, he lowered her to the grass and cradled her in his arms while he felt her wrist. Her pulse

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peered at her face; it was masklike in the flickering glare of the flames. There were no signs of any injuries.

Her lids fluttered open.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I think so."

"Lie still, then. I've got to get Nedda."

The intense low roar of the flames inside the house came to them like the stertorous breathing of a sleeping giant.

"You can't!" she cried, starting up from the grass. "Curt, you mustn't!"

He left her without a word, crossing the driveway in two long strides, taking out his lipstick-stained handkerchief as he went up the steps. He tied it about his face in a makeshift mask and entered the house. The pressure of the hot air had increased. It pushed against him, resisting his forward movement. Gauzy streamers of smoke leaked under the closed doors lining the hall. He called Nedda by name, loudly, his handkerchief pulled away from his mouth. He choked, his throat suddenly raw with smoke. The fire burned with insensate fury at the end of the hall. Tiny restless flames danced over one another in a lengthening line.

Guarding his face with his arm, he went toward the playroom slowly, gropingly, as though he were burrowing his way through a resistant spongy wall. He called again and choked with the stinging impact of smoke. It seared his throat and lungs. Tears filled his eyes, streaking down his cheeks.

As he reached the opened door of the playroom, yellow-orange light mushroomed inside the room with the tearing sound of ripped silk. For a fractional instant as he crouched instinctively away from the sudden intense heat, every detail of the room was vivid as a scene illuminated by a photographer's flashlight. Nedda lay motionless on the floor in front of the bar. The tropical fish still swam aimlessly in the aquarium, lighted now by the glare of the flames; they were gold and crimson flecks in a bloody fluid which had once been murky green. The glass tank burst as he started toward her. A miniature torrent of water and fish swept on the floor.

Momentarily the flames which ringed about her subsided with a sullen splutter, replaced by successive billowing puffs of smoke and steam. He darted toward her and took her up in his arms. She was heavier than Carol. Her head rolled loosely on her shoulders. He stood still, suddenly engulfed in smoke, blinded by involuntary tears. He fought against inhaling the choking fumes; his lungs threatened to burst with the effort.

Stumbling, he turned and headed toward the hall. The left wall was sheathed in flame. Hot air pushed past him, as though racing him to the outside. He moved toward the door which still leaned crazily from the lintel.

The cold night struck him with the physical impact of an icy shower. Paradoxically it paralyzed rather than revived him. He fought desperately against a sudden draining away of consciousness, dimly aware, through his watering eyes, of black cutout figures milling around in the driveway, the unintelligible murmur of many voices, the flashing of countless lights. He felt himself sway forward over a crumbling precipice and sought to lean backward, fearful of dropping the girl in his arms.

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Someone caught him as his legs buckled under him. Strong hands clamped around his arms. The burden in his arms miraculously vanished.

It was like drowning off the Jackson Park beach . . . like diving into unconsciousness as the pistol butt flashed again in the naked light . . . like struggling in the entangling folds of a vast black curtain . . .

After an instant he could hear a mumble of voices through the blackness enveloping his mind. A keener sound dominated the blurred voices. Slowly, stupidly, he identified it as the thin shriek of a siren. A bell rang somewhere, over and over again. He felt more lights flashing beyond his closed lids.

When he opened his eyes, he thought he had lost all sense of time. A white jacket leaned over him; brown pupils swam in magnified distortion behind thick lenses; white walls gleamed behind the jacket and the glasses. He was certain his sensations had been illusory — he had been taken to a hospital. But then the white jacket moved back from him. The white wall identified itself. He was in an ambulance, and it was motionless. A soot-grimed face under a fireman's helmet grinned at him from the open end of the vehicle. Beyond the bulky shoulders he could hear voices, a ringing bell, the fierce steady hiss of high-pressure hoses.

The interne said, "You're all right. You've lost your lashes and your eyebrows, but you're okay."

"Nedda?" he asked. "Miss Kendall?"

"She's been taken to the hospital."

"Hurt?"

"Not seriously. Not burned, anyhow. You got to her just in time."

"How did it happen?"

"A defective gas heater," said the fireman in the open door. "The joint's pretty much of a wreck inside."

"Where's Carol?"

"What?"

"The girl who was with me."

"You mean the little babe with the curly brown hair?"

"Yes."

"She stuck around until she knew you were both all right and then started down the road on foot."

"When was that?"

The fireman moved away, in response to a call. "Five or six minutes ago."

He started up from the pallet. "I've got to get out of here."

The interne put out his hand. "Wait, now ——"

"I'm all right. I've got to get going."

"But the fire patrol ——"

"Later," he said, making his way to the end of the ambulance. "I'll talk to them later."

Dizziness rocked him when he jumped down to the ground. He shut his eyes and clutched a handrail for support. The moment passed. He went on to his car.

It was another five minutes before he could drive through the clustered groups of curious onlookers in pajamas and topcoats, nightgowns and fur coats. The house still stood, but it had suffered palpable damage. His eyes smarted as he drove down the road. He peered from side to side, trying to see beyond the sweep of his lights, not wanting to miss Carol.

There was no sign of her, either on the road or on the boulevard. A sudden wave of fatigue swept over him. There seemed to be nothing left to do but go back to the hotel.

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Momentarily he sought to resist the idea. Time was running out too fast for him — the thought of Gitzer going to the police the moment he learned about Mason should have spurred him into new action . . . but he had reached an impasse in his thinking. He felt blocked, trapped, hemmed in by imponderabilities. He had no alternatives at his disposal. All he could do was return to his room and try to rest until morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Alone in the hotel room, smoking at the window and looking out at the dark empty brooding night, he told himself for the fiftieth time to put out his cigarette and go to bed. But sleep was farther away than ever. Ironically the thin jet of smoke he inhaled was refreshing and stimulating to lungs which two hours before had choked stranglingly with smoke. His mind darted restlessly to and fro; he had expected to be exhausted by the time he returned to the hotel; instead, he was keyed up to an explosive tension.

It was an unexpected reaction. With Judd Mason suddenly dead, all his plans had come to nothing. A week earlier he would have sworn the fact would leave him with a sense of bitter frustration, redoubling his loneliness. If you had only a single enemy, you were still less lonely than a man both friendless and foeless. But he felt neither frustrated nor cheated nor lonely. Fay and Alec had been avenged — they would never haunt him again. The knowledge gave him a sense of deep peace beneath his concern about Gitzer. His conscience would no longer torment him while he vacillated between the desire to kill and the reluctance to make it an accomplished fact.

The fact had been accomplished by someone untroubled by conscience. Had Nedda done it? And why had Carol run away?

The thought of her took him to the telephone once again. He had to call her before morning. He had to talk to her. He jiggled the depressor slot on the black pedestal, stirring the night clerk at the lobby switchboard. He gave her Glendale number and then waited while the clerk put through his call. It was almost three by his watch. He listened to the remote buzzing on the line.

Then the buzzing was cut short by the lifting of a receiver.

Carol said, hesitantly, tremulously, "Hello?"

"Carol?"

"Who is this?"

"Prentice."

"Oh."

"I suppose I woke you up, but I was worried about you."

Her voice was low and distant. "I wasn't sleeping. You didn't have to be."

"What made you leave?"

"There was nothing to stay for. Everything had been taken care of. I told them how it happened."

"Nedda's in the hospital." He paused. "She doesn't seem to be in any danger."

"That's good." Her words seemed devoid of both meaning and interest. "Is that why you called me?"

"S[illegible]th[illegible]g else," he said. "I can't

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sleep. I've been thinking about your father ——" He paused again, waiting for a possible response. "Have you said anything about him to anyone?"

"No."

"I've been thinking about both of you. In fact, I tried to call you as soon as I got back to the hotel, but your line was busy."

"When was that?"

"Two o'clock."

"I got home just before then — I managed to find a cab — but I haven't used the 'phone. It's a two-party line, you know. The other subscriber must've been using it."

"What do you want to do about your father? Shall we notify the police?"

"You said to wait until morning."

"I know I did," he said. "I didn't find out anything, though. I didn't talk to anybody except Nedda, and she didn't make any sense. I imagine her house wouldn't have gone up in smoke if she hadn't been drunk."

Again the voice on the wire seemed remote, disinterested. "Yes."

"What were you talking about with Sorel?"

"I was telling them about Janet Craig's family. I'd sent them the few things she'd left at the house, and I had a letter from them this afternoon. Her mother thanked me and said what a blow it had been to them — Janet had been a champion swimmer in school . . ." Her voice faltered. "I — I'd never known that. She'd never told anyone."

"That should put your mind at ease, then."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it's only a personal guess, but I doubt if a good swimmer would choose drowning as a means of suicide. It doesn't seem right psychologically. I'd say you didn't have to blame yourself for anything. Her drowning was accidental."

"I hope you're right," she said softly, almost in a whisper. "Janet was such a strange girl — so quiet and lonely. But now she's dead — like my father . . ." All at once her voice was veined with unutterable fatigue. "I don't know what to say about him. I feel so worn out — so mixed up . . ."

"Do you want to sleep on it?"

"If I can ——"

"All right. I'll call you first thing in the morning."

"If you want to," she said — "after you've called Nedda Kendall."

An abrupt click cut the connection between them. He sat on the edge of the bed, holding the receiver in his hand, wondering how to interpret her last words. Then he shrugged, and hung up, and lay back on the bed, still dressed, knowing he would be unable to sleep.

Finished, his mind said — *all finished . . .*

Yet it wasn't finished.

In a matter of a few short hours it would be morning. He would have to call Hesbie and tell him Judd Mason was dead. Countless questions would follow for both Carol and himself. His only hope lay in the questions Nedda would have to answer. She remained the most logical suspect in Mason's death. If she had killed him — and had then attempted suicide . . .

Or would she attempt suicide?

It seemed completely alien to her temperament. Murder, yes — she had the necessary aggressive drive for it . . . but not self-destruction.

He stiffened, abruptly alert, his doubt

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slowly crystallizing into tangible suspicion. The fire might have been an accident, but its cause could have been planned. Someone might have intended Nedda to die in the night after her guests had gone. Her death could have been intended to seem accidental, caused not by gas which would ignite but by gas which would asphyxiate. Someone could have gambled on the factor of her drunkenness, knowing she would hardly notice the escaping fumes. That meant it had to be someone who had known she was without servants and would be completely alone once her guests had left. His suspicion became certain. What was meant to seem like an unfortunate accident had turned into a violent disruption of a murderous scheme, and one of her guests had been responsible for it.

But who would want to kill Nedda?

Each of her guests, except himself, had enjoyed an opportunity to turn on the heater before their departure. All of them had been out of the playroom at one time or another. Casually leaving the room and turning on the gas had required only decision and audacity.

But why should she be marked for death?

He rose from the bed and paced the floor, searching his mind for the reason, reviewing all he had heard at her house. Someone had tried to kill her because she was dangerous. But why? If someone considered her dangerous enough to kill, was it because she was innocent and had nothing to do with Mason's death? That meant she was an unwitting menace to the killer. But why had the attack on her life been prepared while she was still entertaining her guests? Because she had said something unexpected and unpremeditated which threatened the murderer's alibi. Whatever she had said had necessitated prompt reprisal.

But which murderer did he mean — Mason's or Lenore Sorel's?

He stopped at the window, pressing his forehead against the cold glass, looking blankly at the darkness. The answer was almost in reach; it seemed to hover elusively just beyond the window.

Nedda had been scheduled for execution because Mason and Lenore Sorel had been the victims of the same person. Slowly it came to him — first Guthrie's remark . . . *Lenore had very definite ideas about divorce — perhaps because of her Gallic influences* . . . then the questions Bradford had put to Nedda and his own thought — *the kind of a woman a man could kill for — or be killed for* . . . all balanced against Mason's propensity for blackmail and what Nedda had said about her watch. Two last parts completed the structure — the call Nedda had made the morning Lenore Sorel was killed and the call he had just made to Carol. Their sum total represented a direct threat to a clever alibi, and they put Carol in the danger which had imperiled Nedda.

Quickly he turned and went to the telephone. He had to jiggle the hook for several minutes before the desk clerk answered.

"Get me that Glendale number again."

He listened to the whirring noise of the dialing at the switchboard. There was a pause. The fretful whine of a busy signal came over the wire.

"Sorry. Line's busy."

"Keep on trying," he ordered. "Call me back as soon as you get it."

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He hung up and took out cigarettes and walked nervously about the room. He had to warn her. The attempt against Nedda's life had miscarried by a matter of minutes. He had to get her out of the house.

Three minutes went by. He picked up the receiver again and impatiently waited for the desk to answer.

"Desk . . ."

"Did you try that number again?"

"Sure. I still get a busy signal."

"Keep on trying," he said. "It's important."

But the moment he replaced the receiver he knew he couldn't risk waiting for the call to be completed. His fear propelled him into the hall, toward the elevator. But the red light glowed above the button — the elevator was in use. The creaking mechanism was undergoing the series of gradated sounds which meant the cage would stop at his floor. He waited, tense, restive, trembling. The elevator roof came into view. Then the lighted interior, blurred behind the narrow dirty glass panels, moved above the floor level with agonizing slowness. The elevator grated to stop, and the automatic door slid back. He stood aside to let the occupant step out and then froze, looking at Mel Gitzer, still in his wrinkled blue serge, still shabby and furtive and unclean.

For an instant their mutual surprise immobilized each of them. Surprisingly Gitzer was the first to recover. His hand flashed from his pocket with uncommon celerity. A knife blade glinted viciously in his grimy palm. Curt thought of Simon Cotton — the unsuspected link between two opposites . . .

"Don't make any funny moves," Gitzer said in his hoarse, hollow voice. "Keep your hands away from your coat. Spread 'em away."

Curt slowly obeyed. "What do you want, Gitzer?"

The narrow shoulders shifted with false indifference. "I figured maybe we could talk — but seein' you're going somewheres ——"

"I couldn't sleep. I'm going out for coffee."

"An' maybe a little vaseline for your eyebrows . . ." The bloodshot dark eyes narrowed under the hat brim. "You're not goin' anywheres, Prentice. We're gonna talk."

"What about?"

"About you. We got plenty to talk about."

Suddenly Curt felt despair slip through him in a chilling wave. He had to get out to Glendale. Every second of delay . . .

"What are you talking about?"

"You know." The loose mouth under the big angular nose twitched in a sudden mirthless grin. "Mason."

At last the threat he had feared was in the open. Gitzer had been cunning enough to keep out of sight, but he had followed him. There was no need for him to wait to read about Mason in the newspapers. He was already in a position to go to the police.

"Yeh." It was as though the quick, furtive mind behind the shifting eyes had read his thoughts. "I seen him already. You an' the babe, too."

"You still think I have money, don't you?"

"I figure we can strike up a bargain. You know the spot you're in. I seen you dump the heater."

"If you know that ——" Curt clutched at a desperate hope. "Listen, Gitzer — if you know who really did

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it for God's sake——"

"Don't hand me that. You're the boy for me. You're my meal ticket."

"But if you know who——"

"For my dough, you're the patsy. Start coughin' up, sonny."

"I don't have any money on me."

The knife blade twisted, catching the light in a sudden gleam. "Don't hand me that."

"It's in my room," Curt said quickly. "We'll have to go back for it."

"Okay. Start moving. Only no funny stuff. Put your arms up in front of you. I'll be right behind you."

Turning, arms extended before him in the time-honored tradition of stage sleepwalkers, knowing he cut a ridiculous figure, Curt walked slowly along the corridor, retracing the hurried steps he had taken a few short minutes before. His mind flicked back and forth, desperate as a caged animal. He had to get to Carol. Every minute she was left alone . . .

"Not too fast," Gitzer said behind him. "Take it slower."

Again he obeyed, slowing, and then it came to him. Acting instinctively, he dropped forward to the floor, taking the shock with his outstretched hands and kicking back his legs in the same movement. His heels caught Gitzer squarely in the knees. He heard the crack of leather against bone and felt a kneecap give sickeningly under the impact. As Gitzer cried out, he twisted quickly on his back and brought his right leg back and kicked the other in the abdomen as he fell forward doubled up with pain. Gitzer gasped and went limp, and then collapsed in a helpless heap beside him. His knife clattered on the linoleum.

For a moment Curt lay panting beside him, winded, overcome by renewed fatigue. The hall remained quiet. The snoring behind the closed doors continued, unbroken, uninterrupted. At last he rose unsteadily to his feet and then bent over Gitzer and gripped his fleshless body under the arms and dragged him back to the storage closet. He listened to his harsh, steady breathing for a moment and then pushed him inside the closet, cautiously fearful of making any undue noise that might be overheard.

The spent, limp body sagged shapelessly among the mops and pails.

He closed the door, and took a deep breath, and then turned back to the elevator, weak with both fear and exertion, knowing his delay could easily be fatal, afraid to consider its full consequences.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The corner bungalow, like the neighboring houses on either side of the street, was dark. He wondered whether to ring and wait for the door to open or to see if the door had failed to lock again, but in the next instant, as he moved closer, he saw the door was slightly ajar.

He listened intently, holding his breath. No sound came from inside. He waited a moment, debating his next action, listening to the throb of blood in his ears. The house remained silent. He pushed the door, gently, tentatively. It swung inward a little more than a foot and then stopped without a sound.

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Again he listened. Again there was no ound. He eased his way silently hrough the narrow opening and then ently closed the door.

The darkness tingled all around him, s though the silence were compounded f thrusting pin points. He stood gainst the door, not moving, waiting or his vision to refocus against the liminution of light. Then there was a ustling sound down the hall. He ensed, crouching a little, feeling his ngers spread and stiffen against his ides. The rustling sound was succeeded by an identifiable noise — the rating of a chair . . . someone had umbled against it.

Momentarily, paralyzing fear turned is knees into useless pulp. But the oise had already startled Carol. He eard her cry out in her bedroom. As e forced himself to move forward, ght splashed in a yellow puddle in ie narrow hall, coinciding with the int chinking sound of a metal lamp ain hitting against a bed board.

Carol gasped in shocked surprise. Oh!"

Then he heard a bland, gentle voice urmur, "I advise you to be quiet, my ear," and clenched his spread fingers angry despair. It was what he had pected, what he had feared. Victor rel had beaten him in his race against me. His legs felt hollow with weakess. He moved slowly down the hall, earer the bedroom.

Carol said tremulously, "What are ou doing here?"

"Stumbling over your furniture, I'm raid." The bland voice took on a rious note of weary pique, almost ternal in tone, as if he were a tired rent chiding a mischievous child. You weren't supposed to wake up."

"But it can't be — you can't ——"

"Really?"

"But I don't understand ——"

"Don't you?"

Her voice shuddered with sudden horrified realization. "You killed my father!"

"How did you find out about him?" he demanded sharply.

"We found him earlier this evening — Curt and I . . ."

"You notified the police?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I — I don't really know. Curt persuaded me to wait until morning."

"Why?" The bland voice rose threateningly. "Tell me!"

"I don't know. I think he had an idea Nedda Ken ——"

"What about her?"

"He seemed to think she might know something about it. That's why we came to the house."

"Where is he now?"

"At his hotel, I suppose. He made me come home."

Curt reached the periphery of the lighted floor space and then stood motionless against the dark wall, looking into the bedroom at an acute angle. Only Sorel was visible to him. Carol was beyond his range of vision, still in bed. The light from her bed lamp illuminated the little dealer only partially. His urbane, knowing eyes remained in half-shadow; the rest of his face seemed waxy-looking, suave as ever, deliberately expressionless.

"Why did you kill him?" Carol whispered. "What made you do it?"

"I was forced to do it."

"Why, though? For what possible reason?"

The slight tailored shoulders

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shrugged carelessly. "Why do you think?"

Her voice dropped to a low, shamed level. "Because he killed — because your sister . . ."

"Because he murdered Lenore?"

Her answer was barely audible. ". . . yes."

Suddenly, incredibly, laughter bubbled inside the man standing in half-shadow. It was little more than a mirthless gurgle, a sound divorced even from sardonic amusement. The facial muscles remained unaffected.

Then the telephone shrilled in the entrance hall.

The laughter stopped abruptly, as if it had been stilled by a knife thrust. "Who would that be?"

Again the telephone rang, urgent and portentous in the darkness.

Carol said, "I — I don't know."

"Yes, you do! Who would it be at this hour?"

"I tell you I don't know. It must be a wrong number."

"Is it?"

Curt heard the same question echo in his own mind. It was the right number. He was suddenly certain of it as the bell pealed with shrill, inexhaustible impatience. The night clerk had been away from the lobby switchboard when he left the hotel. He felt certain the old man was just putting through the call he had ordered.

On a sudden impulse, while Sorel still stood motionless and irresolute, he turned quickly and moved silently towards the entrance alcove. It was an absurd, impossible risk to take — he knew it, and yet he had to chance it. If he could answer long enough to summon the police . . .

He blundered into the footstool with sickening force. The shock threw him off-balance. He fought both against falling and against making any noise, but he sprawled forward on the floor with an unavoidable thud. His leg twisted under him, momentarily rendering him helpless, unable to spring to his feet.

The flashlight beam shone full in his face, blinding him.

"Stay where you are," Sorel said coldly. "Don't move." The bland voice took on a rasping edge. "You will come out here, too, Carol. Light a lamp."

The telephone had stopped ringing by the time she switched on the light.

Curt blinked against the subdued glare of the floor lamp beside the divan and looked up at her with bleak contempt for the clumsy, ineffectual figure he cut on the floor. She had draped a blanket over her pajamas. She looked like a frightened, bewildered child aroused from bed in the middle of the night and confronted with circumstances beyond her comprehension. For a moment unbearable compassion and remorse stabbed through him — she resembled Fay so closely . . . as Fay must have looked when she had found herself locked up in the detention cell with the drunks and the incorrigibles cursing and shrieking in the darkness. He had to turn his eyes away from her looking at Sorel, watching him switch off the flashlight and toss it on the divan. His manicured hand held a Luger automatic. It was equipped with a silencer.

Sorel said, "Get up. Slowly, however. Sit in the chair. Keep your hands flat on its arms." The oval olive-brown eyes watched him with unwavering directness. The suave mouth under the thin mustache had become a ruled line. "You, too, Carol. In the other chair.

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Place your hands the same way."

They obeyed him in slow, careful silence, not looking at one another.

"What did you think you could accomplish?" Sorel asked quietly.

Curt shrugged. "Telephones are meant to be answered."

"So that you might call the police?"

"They already know I'm here."

Sorel shook his head. "Oh, no. You wouldn't have been foolish enough to come here alone if you'd notified them."

"Have it your way," Curt said carelessly.

"It's very much my way, don't you think?"

Carol looked at the automatic with sick eyes. "What are you going to do?" A pleading note entered her voice. "Killing us won't help you! Just because my father killed your sister——"

"Your father didn't kill her," Curt said. "That isn't why your father was murdered."

Quick interest flickered in the shadowed brown eyes, but Sorel remained silent and unmoving.

"Don't you see why he's here?" Curt asked, still not looking at her, keeping his eyes on the gun. "You shouldn't have talked to him about Janet Craig tonight. She'd been a champion swimmer, and yet she'd drowned. He was afraid you might tell other people about that — people who might get curious about it. He was the one who drowned her, you see."

"Curt, no!"

"Ask him yourself."

"But how could——" she asked, her voice quavering. "How could you have possibly done it?"

The thin shoulders moved in a careless shrug. "Why not let your young friend tell you?"

"I think I know how," Curt said. "Your car wasn't stolen. You'd merely hidden it somewhere. You sneaked out of your apartment Tuesday night, made sure no one followed you, picked up your car and then drove up to Santa Barbara and killed the girl. You drove back to Los Angeles that same night, abandoned your car down on Central Avenue and got back to the apartment before dawn. You looked all in the next day, but no one thought that was anything unusual. It was the natural result of your grief for your sister."

Carol said, "Is — is that true?"

Sorel nodded. "Oh, yes. It had to be done that way."

"But why? Why did you do it?"

"Because he killed his sister," Curt said. "He had to get rid of Janet to make his alibi airtight."

"But how could——" Carol shook her head bewilderedly. "Curt, he couldn't!"

"It was Janet Craig who called him at the gallery Monday morning." He forced himself to be calm, wondering how long Sorel would let him continue. "Don't you see how it was? At that moment Lenore Sorel was already dead. It was Janet who posed as Lenore for my benefit and established his alibi for him. I was a stranger and an unimpeachable witness. He'd killed his sister before he ever left the apartment."

"But Janet would never have consented to take part in murder——"

Sorel shrugged. "She did so unwittingly. I told her I wished to play a joke on Prentice. Even so, she would have done almost anything for me . . ."

"But not murder," Carol said. "Yes, you knew that much about her! You

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knew you had to kill her to keep her quiet!" The condemnation in her voice indicted him with the scorn of one swindled and betrayed. "Why did you kill my father? Was he dangerous, too?"

"Like your friend, he was a little too astute. He put too many irrelated incidents together and came out with an answer that would have been fatal to me. He made the mistake of trying to blackmail me."

"But how could you? Why should you?"

"Perhaps your friend can tell you . . ."

"I know your sister was married before," Curt said slowly. "I wondered if that had anything to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it," the man with the gun said with tired scorn. "Lenore wasn't my sister. She was my wife." He smiled mordantly, at himself rather than his listeners. "Yes, I'm André Moret — her husband . . . not her brother. In 1941, when Lenore and her brother were able to get passports to this country because they were still American citizens, I was unable to obtain an exit permit from Vichy. But then Victor Sorel was killed in an air raid. To be very brief about it, we had his passport and identification papers doctored for a price in the black market, and I became Victor Sorel, American citizen, free to return to America with my poor widowed sister."

"Which was why you couldn't marry Nedda," Curt said.

Sorel smiled again, still without mirth. "You can see how impossible that was. I couldn't divorce Lenore. It would have meant my deportation, and for certain reasons I found it inadvisable to return to France. Nonetheless, I wanted Nedda when I saw her."

"For her money?"

"A little more than that, I can assure you. She's a lovely woman . . . or do I have to tell you that?" The thin tailored shoulders shrugged their indifference. "Still, Nedda or no Nedda, life with Lenore had become unbearable. She had become a shrew and worse. Her death was inevitable. It happened when it did because she threatened to expose me when Nedda told her we were engaged — and because I'd found out Mason was her lover."

Carol drew in breath with a sudden gasp. "Oh, no!"

"My wife had strange tastes and strange ways, my dear. Both Bradford and Guthrie were in love with her. She used to delight in telling me how she tormented both of them. Guthrie, as you know, helped finance the gallery only because of Lenore. This afternoon he notified Bradford and me he was withdrawing all his support from us. You may have noticed the strained feeling between us when we were all together this evening."

"So you killed my father because he ——"

"Because he cuckolded me?" The graying man shook his head. "No Carol — not for that reason. He was dangerous to me. He had visited the apartment Tuesday morning and found Lenore dead at ten-thirty. I had to remove him."

"He shot at you, didn't he?" Curt asked.

"So you found the other Luger?"

"Just one of my various discoveries. Like Nedda's watch, for instance. She said she called Lenore at ten to ten, but if her watch were half an hour slow on Tuesday that meant she actually mad

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her call at ten-twenty. That was the time Lenore was supposedly calling you. Nedda should've heard a busy signal, but she didn't. She said the 'phone kept ringing — nobody answered it. That discrepancy scared you, didn't it, Moret? It was only a little thing, but you couldn't have Nedda go on thinking and talking about it. You had to shut her up, too."

"God damn you!" Sudden hate contorted the disciplined features. "How did you know that?"

"I wouldn't have worked it out if we hadn't gone back to talk to Nedda about finding Mason dead in Cotton's house. We thought she knew something about it — he was blackmailing her, too, you see. Her house caught fire just as we arrived. Nedda's in the hospital now, but she won't die. You didn't get to gas her, Moret. She'll have a chance to use her watch as evidence against you."

"Damn you!"

Curt watched him with appraising eyes. "Was she really that dangerous to you, Moret?"

"There was something else," the older man said slowly and bitterly. "Earlier this evening she told me she'd decided not to marry me. I'd killed three people because of her — blood on my hands three times over . . . and then she said she didn't want me . . ." His eyes glittered with returning hatred. "Damn you, Prentice! If you hadn't come along ——" His hand shook. "You upset everything for me!"

"Including telling the police I was coming here tonight. They know why I'm here."

"You're lying!"

"Why do you think I've kept you talking all this time? Because I like the sound of your voice?"

"You're lying!"

Curt pressed his hands against the padded arms of his lounge chair, tensing, not daring to look at Carol. His heart pumped high in his chest, and his throat contracted against an unswallowable lump. He had gambled, but he had risked their two lives on the longest of long shots. He watched Sorel jerk up the revolver in his hand in an awkward movement strangely unlike his usual easy grace.

Carol screamed. Curt threw himself forward from the chair in a blind, desperate tackle. The silenced Luger emitted a soft *pttt!* an instant before his arms and shoulders struck the legs in front of him. His target went down in a limp heap. He scrambled up, ready to pounce.

"Curt, no!" Carol cried out. "Don't!"

Then he slowly edged away, straightening, sobered by the sight of the blood running from the wound in the thin, graying hair. He stood still for a moment, looking down at the motionless body. Then he bent over and felt the back of the hand still holding the silenced Luger. His fingers moved up to the inside of the wrist. There was no pulse. He fumbled his hand under the white shirt front. The heart had stopped beating.

Straightening, not looking at Carol, he moved slowly across the room to the telephone.

"Los Angeles Police Department, please." His voice sounded old and barely recognizable to his own ears. Then "Central Homicide, please. Lieutenant Hesbie. It's important. Yes, at his home, please . . ."

Several minutes passed before his call could be put through to Hesbie at home

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through the department switchboard.

At last a quiet voice said, "Hesbie speaking . . ."

"This is Prentice," he said. "I'm at Carol Mason's house. Your case is pretty much cleaned up."

"I know it. Simon Cotton's just been picked up in San Francisco."

"Not Cotton," he said. "It's Victor Sorel. He just shot himself. I think you'd better get out here right away."

Hanging up before Hesbie could question him, he broke the connection again and set the receiver on the telephone stand and then turned back to the living-room. Carol stood beside the divan, her head turned away from the lifeless heap on the floor. He moved to her and put his arm about her blanketed shoulders and silently led her down the hall to the kitchen. He fumbled for the wall switch, and turned on the light and closed the door.

"It'll be better if we wait in here."

"Yes." Her face was drained of all color. "I think so."

"It's all over now. There'll be questions, but it's over now."

"Yes."

"I should've know what he intended to do when he talked so freely," he said. "It was practically a deathbed confession. Circumstances simply backed him into a corner. There was no other way out for him." Her listlessness troubled him. "About your father, though ——"

"I don't blame you for wanting to kill him," she whispered. "I can see why." A spasm of regret and disgust twitched across her white face. "He — he was simply rotten. I can see why my mother left — and she never knew what he had really become . . ." Her hands moved in a sudden graceless movement, as if in sacrifice. "Now you can go tell Nedda Kendall all about it, can't you?"

"Why should I?"

She turned away from him, huddled in her blanket. "She broke her engagement, didn't she?"

"She wouldn't be marrying Sorel now, anyway."

"You know what I mean."

"I don't know what you think you mean."

"You ran in the house after her — didn't even stop to think ——"

He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him. "Is that why you didn't wait for me tonight? Is that why you ran off?"

She was suddenly busy with the blanket, trying to keep it about her shoulders, not looking at him.

"You know why I didn't stop to think?" he asked. "Because it was like saving anybody at all. There wasn't any emotion at all behind it. When I was a kid, I almost drowned when I dived into Lake Michigan and saved a stray dog in the same way, not stopping to think. But when I got here tonight and found Sorel was already here . . ." He put his hand under her chin, forcing her to look at him. "I had to make myself move down that hall. My knees turned to jelly. I was sick with fear."

Her tired face seemed the loveliest he had ever seen. Even Fay . . . the thought remained uncompleted. You were alive — that was the important thing. Your first love would always be in the background, but you couldn't let fidelity to the dead interfere with living.

"You tell me why," he said. "You know why."

Her arms slowly went around him.

"We'll have to start all over again from the beginning," she said gravely.

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"We both have a lot to forget."

It ocurred to him that the correct words refused to come to either of them. But there would be time enough later for the proper terms of endearment, the passion and the tenderness, the whispered words in the night. They were like travelers meeting at the beginning of a long journey after the first hazardous preliminaries had been overcome. Love might develop slowly, but it would endure. It would be like a studied map turning into a familiar, beloved landscape.

"We'll manage," he said. "We'll do it."

"Of course," she said to him. "We're young."

THE END

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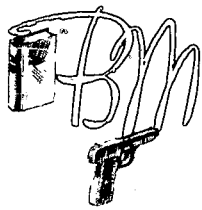
THE ANGRY HEART

Curt Prentice had driven across the continent to find Judd Mason with one thought burning in his mind: "Kill him, kill him!" The memory of his wife's hideous death and of Mason's many other victims spurred him on to revenge. However, the extraordinary circumstances of his finding Mason were such that his hand was temporarily stayed by a web of suspicion and new murder. His life was further complicated by a strange young girl who looked more like his dead wife than anyone he had ever seen. But the most curious thing of all was that he found himself forced to live in Mason's house, to eat Mason's food, to come face to face with him each day—held back, for a reason which he could never have foreseen, from killing this man who so richly deserved to die. . . .



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